

UNITY: MAKING A HERITAGE QUILT

Indu Varma, New Brunswick

INTENDED GRADE LEVEL/SUBJECT AREA

Primary to Senior Canadian History, Art

CONCEPTS

- Canadian culture and heritage, national unity, creative expression.

INSTRUCTIONAL OUTCOMES

Students will:

- demonstrate an appreciation of Canadian culture and heritage that are appropriate to their grade level;
- demonstrate an understanding of issues related to Canadian unity appropriate to their grade level;
- explore their ability to express themselves creatively through participation in quilt-making.

RECOMMENDED TIME FRAME

At least four to five 40-minute periods. This should take students from an initial discussion of historical content through to the completion of the quilt squares. For the actual putting together of the quilt, it is recommended that assistance be sought from parents, or for someone who does quilting professionally to be hired to complete the job.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The impetus for this project came from grade six students who were participating in a unit on Canadian government. The students were learning about issues such as distinct society, aboriginal rights, and senate reform. Guest speakers who were expert in these areas came to speak to us and the students participated in an Electric Forum with other schools. The students soon became very knowledgeable but wanted a way to share these issues with others.

It was felt that a quilt would encourage creative expression and allow a diverse group to participate in the discussion. One square was sent to each of the 60 schools that had been part of the Electric Forum. They were asked to depict their feelings about Canada and tell about what Canada meant to them. We were astounded by the response! The vast majority of the squares were returned with messages imploring Québec to stay in Canada. As a result of this, the students entitled the project “The Unity Quilt.”

ACTIVITY

Discuss the notion that symbols can represent various aspects of people’s cultural identity. Display the coat of arms and flag motifs of provinces as well as various figures used by native people or other ethnic groups representing aspects of our

Canadian culture. Choose an aspect of Canadian culture or heritage that you wish to depict in the form of a quilt. It is a good idea to discuss what the final product will look like and have the students draw some possible quilt designs related to your theme. This allows them to mentally picture the finished product.

The students must begin by drawing their designs on 12" x 12" squares of paper. They should experiment with icons and colours by trying out different arrangements to determine which communicates their desired message most effectively.

Once this has been done, they can trace their design on the quilt square. To do this, place a piece of carbon paper (facing down) on the fabric square. Put the paper design on top and pin the two to the fabric square. Trace the outline of the pattern with a pencil or pen. When the paper design and carbon are removed, a tracing of the pattern should remain on the cloth. Now the design is ready to be worked on. Students can use mixed media or choose one media only, such as fabric paint, markers, or embroidery.

Once the quilt squares are completed, have the students arrange them in a pleasing pattern, adhering to the basic premise that is to be represented. It may be necessary to create some extra quilt blocks to pull together the theme or complete the intended pattern. If there is time, the students can learn to sew the quilt blocks together. Ask parent or other community volunteers to assist in sewing the quilt. Otherwise, the quilting can be done either by the parents group or a professional quilter.

DISPLAY

It is important to display the students' work in a prominent location. This helps build their self-esteem and allow others to share in their achievement. An open house at the school or a community fair may be appropriate times for displaying the quilt. The quilt can eventually rest in the school library or Town Hall as a commentary on our Canadian identity.

MATERIALS/RESOURCES

White cotton broadcloth cut in 12" x 12" squares (the number depends on the size of the desired quilt), carbon paper, straight pins, fabric paints, brushes, markers, embroidery thread, needles, newsprint, quilt batting, red broadcloth (for border) and maple leaves (to decorate border).

About the Educator

Indu Varma combines a project-based teaching approach with telecommunications to move beyond textbooks and classroom walls. Her classes in Canadian government, comparative studies, and the history of New Brunswick come to life through activity-based, interactive projects. Ms. Varma has developed projects including Canadian Fest, Canadian World Fest, and Towards Raising a Canadian Consciousness.

Her students have participated in over 26 radio and television broadcasts. They have talked and worked with fellow students across Canada and the world. They have written and recorded songs, designed unity pins, constructed a national unity quilt, and used the Internet to host forums on Canada. Indu Varma's students have been learning in a global classroom with the world at their fingertips, sharing information with peers, parents and their community. She has won seven major awards including the Prime Minister's Award, a Hilroy Fellowship Award and the Marshall McLuhan Award.