

WALKING ON THE LANDS OF OUR ANCESTORS

An Experiential Approach to First Nations History

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INTENDED GRADE LEVEL/SUBJECT AREA

- These activities can be adapted for any secondary grade level, 9-12
- The subject area is Social Studies – local history

CONCEPTS

- Pre-contact First Nations culture and knowledge; the impacts of colonialism; experiencing traditional First Nations teaching techniques

INSTRUCTIONAL OUTCOMES

Students will:

- Summarize what they learned about local First Nations culture, knowledge, and history
- Participate in activities that use traditional First Nations teaching techniques
- Evaluate the effectiveness of traditional First Nations teaching techniques and compare to the contemporary education system
- Describe connections they made between how the past connects to the present and future

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Prior to European contact, the First Nations people of Canada had a society that was unique in every way. First Nations people had their own forms of governance, healthcare, spirituality, resource use, social structures, and education. Children were regarded as gifts from the Creator and they were treated with the utmost of love and respect. Traditional education from First Nations cultural groups all across Canada had these qualities in common:

- children would be taught by many different members of their family and community
- learning was hands-on, experiential, and took place out in the environment or within First Nations cultural practices (such as the potlatch or longhouse systems on the west coast)
- learning was life-long and started at birth and ended at death
- children were the students and also the teachers: adults and elders could also learn from the wisdom of children
- children learned by watching and doing, but they also learned independently through coming of age ceremonies and by spending time alone
- children learned through an oral culture, where knowledge was passed down verbally through stories, songs, dances, and artistic representations
- the education of First Nations children was holistic and children learned how everything was interconnected; everything had a spiritual connection

- at the core of traditional education was the value of respect: respect for oneself, for others, for the Creator, for the environment, for the ancestors, and for the generations to come in the future

After the eras of first contact and the fur trade, the era of colonialism saw policies of assimilation enforced by the Canadian government with the goal of assimilating First Nations people into the European-based Canadian culture. The tools of assimilation were mandated through the Indian Act, a set of laws that applied just to the First Nations people of Canada. Mandatory residential school education, cultural bans, and resource-use restrictions were enforced through the Indian Act.

First Nations people were moved onto restrictive reserves and they were considered wards of the government. First Nations people were not regarded as Canadian citizens and given the right to vote provincially in British Columbia until 1949 and federally until 1960. The potlatch ban was not removed from the Indian Act until 1951, the same year that First Nations people were given permission for the first time to attend public schools.

The most damaging of assimilation policies was the residential school system, a system that was contradictory to traditional First Nations teaching practices in every way. First Nations children were removed from their families and communities and taken away to industrial schools where they were forced to live year round and adopt a European-based culture and religion. In some cases, children were permitted to return home during holidays or the summer. But this did not make up for the trauma children experienced by being denied a normal childhood with their parents and families. Instead, they spent their childhoods in residential schools located far from home, where abuse, neglect, and strict regimentation were commonplace. It is only now that residential school survivors are starting to receive compensation from the Canadian government and religious institutions for the abuse they suffered at these schools. In BC, the last residential school did not close until 1984. The after-effects of residential schools continue to impact First Nations people and communities today.

It is important that these aspects of Canadian history are addressed in our Social Studies classes so that all students have an understanding of the lasting impacts of colonialism on First Nations people. Canada is a relatively young country, and students should be knowledgeable about the people and cultures that were here first. Our contemporary education system is still modeled on European culture, but all students can benefit by learning about and experiencing traditional First Nations teaching practices. Teachers do not need to be First Nations to incorporate these teaching strategies into their classrooms. Members of local First Nations communities are valuable resources and contacts for teachers wanting to incorporate First Nations knowledge, culture and history into their classes. In order to understand contemporary Aboriginal issues, we must first examine how these issues are rooted in the past. Issues such as treaties, land claims, residential school compensation, healthcare, and education, just to name a few, are important to all Canadians, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. A perfect place to learn about and bring greater awareness to these issues is in our classrooms.

INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITIES

There are several activities that teachers can do in their classrooms to familiarize students with traditional First Nations teaching techniques and protocols. Once students have a foundation of knowledge, going on a hike to learn about local First Nations culture and history will have more meaning.

Introductory Activity #1 - Talking Circles

Talking circles are a traditional form of communication common to many different First Nations cultural groups. I use talking circles in the classroom so that students can experience this form of the oral culture. Tips for using a talking circle include:

- Try to use a talking circle in your class once a week and whenever you have a First Nations guest speaker (to do introductions)
- Use an item that is special to you or the students (a feather, rock, stick, shell, etc.)
- Only the person with the shell (or whatever you use) can talk – everyone else listens
- It is good to hear from everyone in the circle, but everyone has the right to pass
- No one is to leave during a circle
- If using the talking circle in the classroom, lock the doors and put a “circle in progress” sign on the doors so you do not get interrupted by late-comers; unlock the doors once the circle is finished
- Whatever is shared in the circle stays in the circle
- Use “I” statements; no discussion about what people share
- Teachers, start by introducing yourself: your name and where you are from
- Sometimes people will also share who their family is
- In very formal circles, people stand when it is their turn to speak
- Share a little about yourself: how you are doing, something you are looking forward to, what is going on in your life, or share opinions if the circle is addressing a particular topic/issue
- Pass the talking circle object on to the students and they will each contribute to the circle in the same way, or say “pass”



When I use Talking Circles in my classroom, we pass around this shell.

It is significant to me because it was given to me by my best friend.

It was given to her by the Aboriginal people of the Cooke Islands when she was working there.

It has a black pearl attached to it and the students really feel that this is a sacred object.

Introductory Activity #2 - Guest Speakers

Traditionally, youth were taught by many members of the community. Though I teach most of the course myself, I also invite several guest speakers into my class so that students can experience this aspect of the traditional First Nations education. Guest speakers bring the topics you are learning about in your class to life. Suddenly, course content becomes real and enriched with emotion. I invite guest speakers to come into my class to talk about many topics, including the Indian Act, residential schools, Métis culture and history, and the BC treaty process. I have included student feedback from just two of the guest speakers who have come into our class. Before you invite in a First Nations guest speaker, there are some general tips and protocols to keep in mind:

- Discuss timeframe and content with your guest
- Arrange for you school or school district to send a monetary honourarium to your guest speaker
- Make sure he/she is comfortable with the topic
- Ask your guest if it is okay for you to take pictures
- Ask guest for background info you can use to introduce him/her
- Contact your guest a day or two before the presentation to make sure the presentation is “still a go”
- Prepare your class: go over respectful behavior, brainstorm questions, remind the class to take notes
- Arrange to meet your guest before class starts at a location that is easy for the guest to find (like the main office)
- Does your guest need handouts photocopied or any other preparations?
- Let your guest know where the restrooms are
- Offer the guest something to drink and eat
- The teacher or a student introduces the guest and the topic of the presentation
- Class introductions: teacher starts and then the students introduce themselves (use the circle format)
- Guest then introduces him/her self and then proceeds with the presentation
- Leave sufficient time for the students to ask questions and for closure
- The teacher or a student thanks the guest and presents the guest with a gift
- Time-permitting, each student could thank the guest using the circle format
- Offer to walk the guest out; does he/she have any questions? Let your guest know that the honourarium will be mailed out
- Discuss/debrief the presentation at the next class
- Students should fill out a journal entry based on the presentation; the journal entry should include a summary of what the guest speaker spoke about, what information from the presentation stood out to the students, what the student learned, and opinions, ideas, or connections that the student made as a result of the presentation
- All students should sign a thank-you card; mail the card and a picture from the presentation to the guest

Guest Speaker: Ms. Nella Nelson – “The Indian Act”

I invite Nella Nelson to speak to my First Nations Studies 12 class about the Indian Act and the personal impacts the Indian Act has had on her life. Nella is the Coordinator of the Aboriginal Nations Education Division in the Victoria School District. She is a leader, a role model, and an eloquent speaker.



Nella Nelson's Guest Presentation to
First Nations Studies 12
March 12th, 2008

Student Quotes about Nella Nelson's Presentation

- “Nella Nelson has a very striking presence. It is evident just from looking at her that she is a strong woman. I really enjoyed how she related the impact of the Indian Act on her own family.”
- “I will not forget what Nella's father wrote to the federal government when they threatened to take his status away: “I was born an Indian, I will die an Indian.”
- “The imposed restrictions that were implemented through this blatantly discriminatory legislation often resulted in ludicrous limitations for First Nations people.”
- “Mrs. Nelson gave a very different point of view than I already knew. I had learned about the Indian Act in Grade 10, but our textbook just gave a European settler's point of view & ignored almost all of the First Nations issues.”
- “I enjoyed passing the shell around this day. I felt that Nella was really interested in what everybody had to say which made the whole experience nicer since you could tell there was complete mutual respect.”

Guest Speaker: Mr. Alex Nelson – “Residential Schools”

Alex Nelson is Nella Nelson’s husband and I invite Alex to speak to my class about his experiences attending St. Micheal’s residential in Alert Bay when he was a child. Alex is also a gifted speaker and through his stories, Alex is able to bring a personal, emotional awareness about residential schools to the students. Alex is not only a residential survivor, but also a prestigious Aboriginal role model. Alex is the president of ASRA – Aboriginal Sports and Recreation.



Alex Nelson’s Guest Presentation
April 16th, 2008

Student Quotes about Alex Nelson’s Presentation

- “Alex explained how he centered his life around four principals: Honesty, Trust, Integrity, & Respect. He left us with the message that each one of us has the power to be strong & capable people throughout the stages of our life, no matter what happens to us.”
- “Even though Alex had gone through residential school & talked about all the horrible things that happened, he didn’t speak about it angrily.”
- “Alex Nelson is very inspiring to me. I feel so fortunate to have been able to listen to him speak.”
- “Like all great orators, Alex spoke simply but with great power. His words brought to life the dank halls of the ‘Big School’, the dining rooms filled with the smell of detergent and wide-eyed kids, & the cold, callous countenances of the teachers & attendants. It was definitely more powerful than any old black and white photograph.”
- “I think we can really begin to heal the pain of horrors like residential school by telling our stories and listening to others. And of course to never forget so that we will never allow these horrors to be repeated again.”

Introductory Activity #3 – Field Trip to the Museum

At the beginning of First Nations Studies 12, the students learn about pre-contact First Nations society, followed by a unit on first contact and the fur trade. Much of this content is learned through lectures, videos, and the BC First Nations Studies 12 textbook. At this point in the course, I take students on a field trip to the Royal BC Museum where they can see many of the topics we have been talking about on display at the Museum.

Our field trip is facilitated by Leslie McGarry, a First Nations woman who has an immense amount of firsthand knowledge about the First Peoples exhibit in the museum. We start the field trip in the Mungo Martin Longhouse and Leslie teaches the class about the function of the longhouse in coastal First Nations cultures and also the purposes of potlatch ceremonies.

Going to the museum is a part of traditional, experiential learning. By hearing stories and firsthand knowledge about the artifacts, the history we are learning about in class becomes a lot more real. A field trip like this is beneficial to all kinds of learners, including visual, auditory, and tactile. After the field trip, students complete a journal entry very similar to the kind they would write after a guest speaker's presentation.



The Mungo Martin Longhouse at the Royal BC Museum



Our facilitator – Leslie McGarry

Student Quotes about the Field Trip to the Museum

- “Leslie gave new life to the objects that we were observing. If I had stayed by myself in the museum all day, I would have scarcely noticed a third of all that she showed us in a few hours.”
- “Going to the BC Museum was an excellent experience. I learned more than I would have learned in a whole month at school. Every artifact in the exhibit had a story to tell.”
- “I have walked through the same exhibit many times but no other time have I noticed so many different things, and been amazed at their intricacy yet simplicity. The longhouse’s smell is what drew me in: the musky, fresh, cedar smell was very distinct.”

CENTRAL ACTIVITY: WALKING ON THE LANDS OF OUR ANCESTORS

An essential component to teaching about First Nations culture, knowledge and history is to take your class on a field trip to a local First Nations territory. This kind of activity works best once the students have had an opportunity to:

- learn about the local history, including pre-contact First Nations society, first contact with explorers and fur traders, and colonialism
- to experience traditional First Nations teaching techniques, such as talking circles, guest speakers, and experiential learning

Taking your students out to a local traditional territory requires a lot of planning and the adherence to certain protocols. If you are not from the local First Nations territory, it is proper protocol to ask someone from that territory to facilitate your trip. Your facilitator can check with the local community and people to make sure that it is okay for your class to visit their lands.

Even though I am a First Nations person, I am not from the local territory where I teach in Victoria. I am from the Chemainus First Nation, so I asked Mark Albany, a First Nations counsellor in our school district, and also a member of one of the local territories, to facilitate our field trip to some of the traditional sights in the Victoria area. Jim Young, Education Liaison with the Victoria Native Friendship Centre, co-facilitated the field trip with Mark Albany. Before we went on the field trip, Mark and Jim came in to speak to my class to tell the students how to prepare for the field trip (what to wear, what to bring, etc.) and also to let the class know what the ground rules were. This is an all-day field trip, so field trip permission forms need to be filled out and transportation organized.

Location #1 – Craigflower Creek

We started our field trip in a wooded area that is a part of Thetis Lake Park. We hiked along the trails in the park for over two hours, where we learned about traditional First Nations plant uses and where we also got to see evidence of a traditional First Nations village site. Some of the evidence that we saw included culturally modified trees (CMT's) and middens, which are areas of soil that include evidence of the people who used to live there.



Facilitators: Mark Albany & Jim Young



Just before we started our hike.



Hiking up into the woods



Learning about traditional plant uses



Looking at the old village site, including CMT's and soil middens



Close-up of a CMT
(teacher: Jim Pine – additional chaperone)



In this picture, we learned about how the construction of a golf course (seen at the top, right side of the photo) was causing damage to the creek below. Fallen trees and debris are starting to clog the creek as all of the vegetation has been cleared below the golf course, causing instability in the land and trees and soil to fall.

Location #2 – Craigflower School and the Gorge Waterway

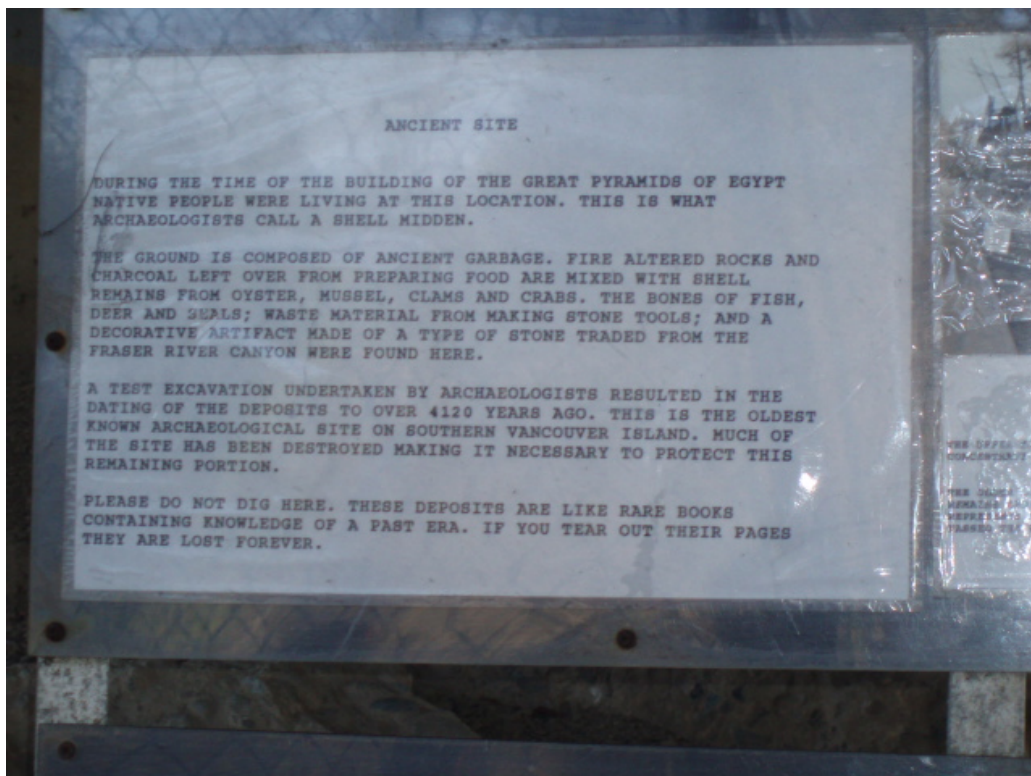
At the second location of our field trip, we went to look at evidence of First Nations village sites in the urban, Victoria setting. First, we went to a spot beside the original Craigflower Elementary School to look at middens and then we went to a location under a bridge by the Gorge Waterway to look at another ancient midden site and to hear a creation story from that area. It was fascinating to see cultural evidence so close to the city.



Midden site next to Craigflower School



Midden Site under a bridge near the Gorge Waterway



This informational sign explains why the midden next to Gorge Waterway is being protected

Location #3 – Downtown Victoria; the Inner Harbour

The last location of our field trip was in the heart of downtown Victoria at the Inner Harbour. Here, we learned that the Songhees people originally lived in the area right where we were standing, but in 1911, the Songhees people were moved by the government away from downtown to the site where their reserve is still located today, on the outskirts of Victoria. Two totem poles stand at the location of the original village site to commemorate this history. This part of the trip really brought to life the displacement many First Nations communities experienced as a result of settlement and colonial policies.



A sign that explains the history of this location



Students walking the beach of what was once part of a First Nations Village site until 1911, now at the heart of busy downtown Victoria



Two totem poles commemorate the original village site



This pole depicts a mother and baby, a close-up of one of the poles

Concluding Activity

After our field trip to some of the local, traditional First Nations village sites, the students are asked to complete a reflective journal to summarize what they learned from this experience. Journal writing is an ideal assessment tool when teaching about First Nations content and using traditional First Nations teaching strategies because it allows the students to respond to the learning activities as individual. The students in essence can become the authors of their learning. Journal writing allows for freedom of expression and creativity.

Assignment: Please complete a reflective journal entry based on your experience during this field trip. Your journal entry should include:

- A summary:
 - summarize the field trip – the date, where we went, what we did, who the facilitators were, why we went on this field trip, etc.

- What you learned:
 - About the local sites; First Nations culture, knowledge, and history, etc.

- A personal reflection: some ideas ...
 - What did you enjoy or find interesting about this field trip?
 - Are field trips like this valuable?
 - Did you make any connections between how the past connects to the present or the future?
 - What are your thoughts about experiencing traditional First Nation teaching techniques?

Your journal should include an element of creativity. Some ideas: you could include one of the following: photos that you took during the field trip, drawings inspired by the trip, images that are symbolic of what you learned, a poem based on your experience on this trip, or objects that represent the field trip.

Format:

- a written journal entry: length – will vary; must include the elements listed above
- OR**
- an oral presentation: you could share with the class your thoughts on the elements listed above and share your photos, pictures, objects, or poem

Your journal entry or presentation will be assessed based on the criteria outlined above.

(I have attached three samples of student reflective journals based on this activity. One sample includes photos, another includes a poem, and the third sample includes artwork.)