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# **Flipping History: Understanding Current Aboriginal Issues First, History Second**

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In previous years of teaching, Jean Parker has found it a challenge to connect Aboriginal current issues with post-Confederation Canadian history. She found that the Aboriginal story and identity are overshadowed by the expanding curricular focus on the English, the French and numerous other cultural groups, leaving Aboriginal culture on the fringes of our study of Canadian perspectives. This year in our Grade 7 classroom we took up this challenge by turning our previous approaches inside out, so to speak, and focusing on current issues first. Only then would we work on connecting to the historical events that shaped the sociocultural landscape of Canada today.

In our study of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada, the key current issues are land and education, so we focused our classroom work through these frameworks. Our work was inspired by “An Invitation to Explore the Roots of Current Aboriginal/Non-Aboriginal Relations in Canada” (Jardine 2012). The article was an invaluable source of information and provided a clear-cut interpretation of Canadian political history and its effect on Aboriginal peoples. The presentation of the government bills, policies and acts as “acts affirming Aboriginal and treaty rights” and “acts reinforcing assimilation” (Jardine 2012) provided an accessible framework through which to consider Canada’s history.

As preliminary work on delving into current Aboriginal issues, our students first explored the implications of multiculturalism in Canada and created emerging conceptions of cultural identity and the interconnectedness of individual aspects of identity.

Students studied their families’ immigrant histories, various cultural groups in Canada today and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Students became well versed and thoughtful when thinking about cultural diversity and cultural equity, skills that they continued to develop as we undertook this study.

A brief talk about the variety of ways one might frame one’s identity began this unit of study. I (Almberg) had recently joined the class as a student teacher and was eager to give the students an opportunity to know me and my story. I shared my family’s history and connection to the land we grew up on. Students then wrote informal reflections to consider their own space and how their identity is informed by the space they occupy. Students reflected and shared the possible effects of losing a part of their identity. Students then viewed a brief video explaining the history of the Idle No More movement (Woodward 2013). This recent movement began with small gatherings in Saskatchewan and quickly spread throughout Canada, bringing the often silenced voices of Aboriginal people into the conversation regarding parliamentary proceedings and industry expansion and its associated environmental dangers. The vision of Idle No More is to call “on all people to join in a peaceful revolution, to honour Indigenous sovereignty, and to protect the land and water” ([www.idlenomore.ca/vision](http://www.idlenomore.ca/vision)). Our students responded passionately to this movement, possibly as a result of their studies of migrant cultures in Canada’s history.

Students used music by A Tribe Called Red to understand the connection between history and tradition and

modern lives. This Canadian band combines traditional singing and drumming with modern dubstep music and have “become the face of an urban Native youth renaissance, championing their heritage and speaking out on aboriginal issues, while being on top of popular music, fashion and art” (A Tribe Called Red nd). A Tribe Called Red proved to be an invaluable resource throughout this study, as students often used their music as a grounding point for understanding the challenges and strategies of rebuilding identity.

Next, using the textbook *Voices and Visions* (Francis 2006), students explored the societies of the three first contact nations: the Anishnabe, the Haudenosaunee and the Mi’kmaq. The intent of this work was to give the students a sense of the lifestyle, identity and culture that Aboriginal people are working to reclaim. This was followed by an assignment that endeavoured to honour Aboriginal oral history by challenging students to represent their thoughts orally. Students viewed numerous authentic Aboriginal videos focused on the issue of their choosing (land or education). LearnAlberta’s webpage *Walking Together* ([www.learnalberta.ca/content/aswt](http://www.learnalberta.ca/content/aswt)) was a valuable resource for this portion of our study. The video resources included news clips and features and remix videos of parliamentary proceedings, as well as introductory videos created by Almberg. The culmination of this research project was a video that united students’ understandings of identity and their knowledge of current events. Students were encouraged to forego the use of scripts, although many used graphic organizers as tools. It’s interesting to note that the majority of the videos created took on the form of talk shows. We are left wondering what implications orality has on our culture today.

The introductory portion of this study followed a strategic pattern. Students first found individualized meaning and appeal with the issue through a personal reflection. Students further considered the societal implications of the issues through the Idle No More movement and the work that that group has been doing. Through this step in the process, students worked in peer groups to collaborate and form communal understandings of the topic at hand. This portion ended with a focus on the current movement toward reclamation of identity and culture. Students were again considering individual aspects of the issue, but had now moved past their own perspectives and were seriously considering the issues that others face.

This now led us to the historical focus in this unit, which was to link current Aboriginal issues back to the historical events and their resulting government bills, policies, acts, Supreme Court rulings and

treaties. As a jumping-off point, students in small groups were assigned the bills, policies, acts, Supreme Court rulings and treaties identified by Jardine (2012) in her article that either strengthened Aboriginal cultural identity or pushed for Aboriginal assimilation into British society. Once students explored these primary sources they were able to identify where the seeds of current Aboriginal issues sprouted. As a final historical link the students needed to then find the event or events that led to the creation of these government rulings. This was certainly challenging work to undertake, but the students were able to think about the current issues facing both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians and use that knowledge to critically read the history.

We found that by using this approach of bringing forth Aboriginal issues first and then exploring the historical events that were connected with these issues, our students were more engaged because we started the exploration in their world; they ended up with a stronger sense of Aboriginal perspective. That being said, we certainly did face challenges as we guided our students through this work. Perhaps the most significant was the line we walked between avoiding presenting a single, broad-stroke narrative and still ensuring that the content was accessible to our students. We faced this challenge honestly with our students, frequently reminding students that there is no single story in any issue for any group of people. We were sure to point to the differences between the three first contact groups as historical reference for this. We were also conscientious with the resources our students used, being sure to provide a variety of individuals, genres and opinions to our students.

This study was a valuable one for our entire classroom community. Together we built skills of critical thinking and opinion building while ensuring that a culture of respect was maintained. We welcome any comments or questions.

## References

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