

Aboriginal studies transforming the culture of traditional education

Brampton Guardian

BRAMPTON— The full size birch bark canoe on display at the front of a third-floor classroom at a Brampton high school is the handiwork of Marcel Labelle, a gifted Métis craftsman with a story to tell and an attentive audience.

Accompanied by wife Joanne, Labelle (<http://www.birchbarkcanoes.ca/>) shares his artistry and stories about Métis way of life with students in the St. Thomas Aquinas Secondary School Experiential Academics and Leadership (SEAL) program— a senior alternative education course focusing on First Nations, Métis and Inuit studies.

The program was developed at the school and rooted in the Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board's efforts to integrate First Nations, Métis and Inuit cultures, histories and perspectives in the curriculum.

Since 2007, the Ministry of Education has taken steps to improve achievement among the First Nations, Métis and Inuit students in Ontario public schools. Funding and education policy have been introduced to help boards offer and expand native language and native studies courses, and support programs that assist aboriginal students.

The initiative was also undertaken to expose all students in the province's schools to the history and traditions of Canada's Aboriginal Peoples.

The course material has proven particularly effective in reaching Jennifer Pouw's students. The Aquinas alternative education teacher was instrumental in developing the school's SEAL program.

She has found student attendance and engagement can present two of the biggest teaching obstacles in an alternative education classroom. It's difficult to get kids into the classroom and just as challenging to hold their interest once inside.

These are at-risk students who require a different learning environment that is more hands-on and experiential, Pouw explains.

She has been teaching for 15 years and took native studies courses in university and at teachers college.

"That's when my interest was peaked," she says.

When the board made a commitment to Aboriginal education, Pouw thought her students might also find the subject matter compelling.

"When the board started to offer these programs I started to incorporate them into the alternative education setting," she explains.

"It was initiated to create this interest in programming, improve attendance, and have it, hopefully, overall affect our graduation rates. And it has," according to Pouw.

From the outset, many of the alternative education students, who feel marginalized by society, found they could relate in some ways to the plight of Canada's Aboriginal Peoples.

"They see the connection and it really is truly an instant bond. I guess they share that marginalization, but they share the craving for hands-on learning, experiential learning, learning in the environment and things like that. So it just seems to work," says Pouw. "It's definitely been very engaging for them."

Group excursions outside the classroom to interact with community members and elders are often part of lesson plans that incorporate all parts of the curriculum— from social sciences to physical education. It's far more engaging than sitting at the front of a classroom reading from textbooks, Pouw insists, and the native studies are also authentic teachings.

"We work with the same elders throughout the semester and we often travel with them to reserve," she notes. "So they create these bonds with different teachers who teach in a unique way."



St. Thomas Aquinas Secondary School students Eric McDonald (left) and Kinley Doji learn the basics of making a traditional birch bark canoe as they assemble miniature boats during a senior alternative education course focusing on First Nations, Métis and Inuit studies.

Mary Ellen Gucciardi is the board's Alternative Education and First Nations, Métis and Inuit Studies Consultant. She provides teachers with the resources and professional development support they require to offer native studies and educate themselves about Canada's Aboriginal Peoples.

The courses were always intended to be offered within the structure of alternative programs, says Gucciardi, who has been an educator for 18 years.

"The vision was always to keep these courses experiential based with a focus on experiential learning and authenticity to First Nations, Métis, Inuit history," Gucciardi explains. "So we always engaged elders. We always engaged community partners."

Learning the culture, traditions and history directly from First Nations, Métis and Inuit community members are integral to the course structure— for students and teachers.

"All these things were part of the board's initiative on how kids should experience these courses because for the most part it's not indigenous teachers teaching them," she says.

The board has made an administrative commitment to teacher training and education so whatever is taught in the classroom is culturally and historically authentic. On several occasions, school board administrators and teachers have ventured to Ontario's far north to visit and foster relationships in Aboriginal schools and communities.

"So many of us were educated in a system that was not given an accurate history of our indigenous history," says Gucciardi.

"For us, being predominantly non-indigenous teachers without much background of our own, to make it authentic, we felt quite firmly we have to engage people from First Nations, Métis, Inuit communities to help us in this learning process," she adds.

Gucciardi commends the board for committing resources and finances to ensuring teacher training and student experiences are authentically First Nations, Métis and Inuit.

So much of Aboriginal traditions is shared orally, she points out, students and teachers can't truly learn it from textbooks.

"It's been my experience that many kids are forever changed from what they learn, particularly connecting with elders and traditional practitioners within the community," she says.

Labelle grew up in Mattawa, Ontario, a small logging and trapping community north of Algonquin Park. He does 25-30 presentations a year at schools, universities and venues such as the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian.

He has an environmental studies degree from Nipissing University and has worked as a plumber, home builder and business owner. But he has also spent a good portion of his life trapping and living from the land. When he began building handcrafted birch bark canoes several years ago, it was a return to the traditional Métis way of life from his childhood that still beckoned.

Labelle is happy to share his culture and the Métis respect for the earth with students, he says.

"It's broadening their way of thinking," he believes.

Teaching others about the Métis is something he does for his grandchildren, Labelle adds, there was a time when the Métis couldn't be proud of their heritage outside the community.

"I'm very happy that today's society embraces that they (his grandchildren) are Métis," he says, for many years their history was written by colonizers. Now, he and others have been given the opportunity to rewrite their history, Labelle concludes.

"I feel really privileged to be in this class," says 17-year-old Krystal McLean. "I learn things about First Nations history that I didn't learn in Canadian history."

The alternative education student says she looks forward to Ms. Pouw's class and its hands-on learning and first person view of Canada's Aboriginal culture and traditions. It gives the teenager a better appreciation and understanding of Canadian and First Nations history, she says.

"I'm always really shocked when I hear more things about First Nations culture," McLean admits. "There are things I've never heard of before and it makes me wonder why they don't teach it in Canadian history."

Gucciardi says there are currently about nine secondary schools offering similar courses. Four years ago, when she started in the position, there were four schools with courses.