

Fur Trading (Change of Context Demonstration)

Unit: First Contact, the fur trade and beyond (the historical context of power shifts and natural resource exploitation)

Narrative: This land is whose land?: The shifting narrative of resource extraction in Canada

Binary opposites: powerful and weak

Heroic qualities: Major--Power(shifting over time); minor--courage, survival and fairness

Rationale: Shifts of power between diverse groups/relationships are better accessed through perspective taking. Viewing a singular event/issue from a multiplicity of perspectives gives the learner a greater degree of intimacy with the real issues at play. In this case, through the use of a large trading game simulation, learners were able to play out the intricacies of a pivotal moment in the formation of Canada: The Fur Trade. Events leading from the fur trade altered the course of European (later Canadian)/First Nation relationships not to mention that it paved the way for further European expansion and settlement of the “New World”.

A background narrative, or back story, was introduced comparing the social situation of both European explorers and First Nations of North America. These two back stories set the stage for a comparison of how each group “valued” objects. Bartering was the initial way in which goods were exchanged during the fur trade. Bartering was a nuanced activity that depended upon a variety of factors. Factors such as European demand, the supply of Beaver and conflict between trading groups all contributed to the value of the fur being exchanged. Competition between First Nation groups and Fur trading groups such as the Hudson Bay Company and the Northwest Company also added to this narrative. The role playing game has different scenarios each time such as death decimating entire FN communities to gluts in European trade goods. Each scenario highlights the power relationships at play during this formative time in Canadian history.

In the lesson, four First Nation groups (Haida, Quayquitlam, Coast Salish, and Squamish) were placed at the corners of the gym and two European trading groups (Hudson Bay Company and North West Company) were situated elsewhere. At the whistle all groups began to exchange all their trading cards. The only individuals who were permitted to travel in the gym were the European traders. The groups were not able to communicate using English in the first scenario. In the second scenario one First Nation group had “preferred” trading status with one of the European trading group. Each First Nation group decided what European item they most desired. Each European trading group also decided if, and how, different deals should be made. The goal for all groups was to trade their cards. After each scenario there was a gathering and a debriefing session with students.

Upon Further Reflection

Children obviously enjoyed this game, and if the past is any indicator, will continue to request playing it for the remainder of the year. Setting up in large space is best. This game plays well outside where establishing territory may be easier (i.e. Haida territory is the swing sets). Though not explicit in this write-up the trading cards the students use are also a good tool that is employed in his game. Like in all good lessons the discussion between scenarios is key to imbed the deeper learning and vocabulary. Assessment for this task occurs with the discussion and various visual or written forms. Children were asked after one scenario to create a representation on why they thought it was fair or not fair for one First nation group to attack another over the goods they traded with the Europeans and why they would do it. In yet another task they were asked if getting guns and other metal goods were good or bad for the First Nation's. Through the use of this change of Context experience students easily were able to personify the experience.



Here students are setting up the “play” area. Mats are used to form the territory of various First Nation Groups. The Hudson Bay and Northwest Coast trading groups are in the foreground.



Let the trading begin! Here European and First Nations' traders barter for desired goods. Sometimes the conditions of the trade favour the Europeans and at other times the First Nations have the upper hand.