



# Métis Crossing Land-Based Living Camp

## RLI Indigenous Language Experiences

### Métis Nation of Alberta Region 2



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## Stretching School to Include Integrated Métis Language and Culture

Educators have long been aware that the deepest and most significant learning occurs when children see themselves and their ways of life portrayed in the curriculum. Children are immediately able to make connections, observe subtleties, and critically analyze the portrayal of identity. Métis children rarely, if ever, catch glimpses of themselves in schools. Occasionally, they are presented with images of Métis adults locked in the past or Métis leaders and role models of the present. What about Métis children of today, striving to learn more about their languages and culture in the present? The purpose of this essay and video project is provide an illustrative example of how a schoolteacher might go about making this type of experience accessible, not only for Métis students, but all students in the classroom, so that all learners can draw on relevant, rich experiences that affirm the persistence of being Métis into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The essay is organized into three sections, planning for the experience, implementing the experience, and drawing upon the experience when children return to class. Each section is further subdivided to help teachers consider the more detailed aspects of the development process. Typically, a development process of this scale would take up to one year from conception to completion.

### Document Keywords in nehiyawewin (Cree) or Michif

Please note: words in nehiyawewin or Cree are not capitlized or italicized in this document with intention to normalize their use.

nipiteepagwun –a particular overnight shelter made by hunters in the forest

pasteweyas – dried meat

waskwiw – kindling

saskaomina - berries

maskisina – shoes

sakihitowin – love

nichapan – my grandpa

## Planning Stage

### 1. Pre-planning

#### Land-Based Learning and the Program of Studies

The process begins with a recognition that Métis content is only briefly and specifically mentioned in the grades 4, 6, 7, 9, and possibly 10, in the Social Studies curriculum. However, there are many opportunities to connect outcomes from the Language Arts, Math, Science, Health, and Physical Education curriculum to a land-based learning experience. Recognizing and valuing the abundance of opportunity present in an integrated learning experience is essential to the development process.

What do educators know about the Métis as they exist today in Alberta?

Developing foundational knowledge about the Métis Nation is essential. In addition to stories of Métis of the history, there must also be a sense of understanding that Métis people live and thrive today across Alberta. Preparing to incorporate Métis language and culture experiences into programming should begin with examining one's prior knowledge and identify gaps in present knowledge about Métis presence in the classroom and in the community. Recognizing, for example, that most prior knowledge is based on the history of Métis in the Red River area, rather than localized areas within Alberta, is useful because it provides direction for further learning.

#### Making connections to Métis organizations in the community

The next step in the pre-planning process should involve contacting the provincial Métis organizations to find out what they have to offer in terms of information about the Métis people residing in the area. Many Métis organizations have resources and opportunities to connect. Rupert's Land Institute is an important place to start in Alberta as they provide services supporting all levels of Métis education, and they may be able to connect you with contacts in your region.

### 2. Planning

Connecting with a Métis person who would be willing to share aspects of Métis culture and

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language with an educator and their students is important. Once contact is established, the teacher is ready to proceed with developing an experience for students. Visiting and developing a relationship with the Métis Language and Culture Carrier (MLCC) will take time.

Due to Covid-19 protocols, the planning process in this illustrative example unfolded over the telephone and Zoom initially. Fortunately, the teacher and MLCC were acquainted with one another while they were students at university years earlier. They explored a variety of experiences they might take a group of children through to experience some aspects of Métis language and culture as it is lived and embodied. Due to school closures, it was not possible to take out a classroom of grade four students, but it was possible to take out two groups of children, ranging in age from 1 to 15 years, from the MLCC's and teacher's bubbles. To focus on the sharing of language and culture, the teacher and MLCC decided to have children process a raw hide, with the intent of exploring contemporary uses. Central to the experience is the concept of expressing and understanding the value of connectedness. Providing children with a glimpse of the knowledge and practices that promote wellbeing by engaging in environmental, community, family, and intergenerational tasks contributes to a synergistic outcome of collective wellbeing. Drawing on Cree & Michif to express and affirm kinship relations was helpful to students while learning and working in community. The MLCC invited the elder he works with regularly to join the event, and to help make more extensive connections to the etymology and language use, but he declined due to concerns surrounding Covid-19.

Once the focus for their learning was determined, a meeting was held at the proposed location of inquiry. Ideally the MLCC would have invited the group to his backyard in the city, which is where he normally processes rawhide. However, the space was not large enough to ensure physical distancing, so the next option was a public park. At the first meeting between the MLCC and the teacher it was quickly determined that the proposed location, a public park, had two major restrictions. One is the collection of raw materials (i.e., willow and the time necessary for the drying process). After some discussion about potential locations and factoring in the time it takes to dry a rawhide, more investigation ensued for potential locations on the land that would permit this experience.

Fortunately, Métis Crossing, a Métis Cultural Interpretive Centre located about 1.5 hours northeast of Edmonton, had just reopened to the public, and was open to hosting the experience. After visiting Métis Crossing, the teacher and MLCC decided it would be an appropriate site to implement the very rich cultural and language experience. The dates were determined, and a schedule was loosely constructed delineating major aspects of an overnight experience.

The next major step was securing permission from all parents for the children involved in the activity and from the parents who wanted to accompany their children on the experience.

Field trips usually involved teacher and parent chaperones and for this activity it was not difficult to bring along

parents who were interested in learning about making rawhide as well. Two aspects of acquiring permissions from parents for on the land excursions is to ensure that children declare food allergies and medical conditions.

### Implementation Stage

It was cloudy and rainy the day of the event, but a rain plan had been developed earlier, and was implemented. All the vehicles involved were required to meet at Métis Crossing at a pre-determined time. The incentive for getting there on time was a motorized cart that would transport camping gear to the group campsite. Once the tents, chairs, tables, and all other materials arrived at the site, it was time to make camp.

The MLCC started by showing one adult and several older children how to construct a nipiteepagwun. He explained that these types of overnight shelters are usually made by hunters in the forest, and there is a particular way to position and construct them. The children learned not all spruce boughs are alike and certain ways of configuring the boughs provide an excellent bed and shelter from the rain. This learning became abundantly obvious in the morning when the children awoke from their sleep under the stars. It will be one of those experiences that are etched in the children's memories for a lifetime. The children who observed, listened carefully, and took the time to construct their shelter enjoyed the benefits, while the others at breakfast talked at length about how they had a terrible sleep because they did not watch and listen well.

The teacher and other younger members of the group set up their tents, several tables, and chairs for the activities. A large canvas voyageur tent typical of Métis hunting and fishing camps was erected at the site to serve as the rain shelter, should there be excessive rain. After setting up his own tent, the MLCC went with two other adults into the forest to locate three trees to construct the frame of a tripod drying rack before lunch.

Due to time constraints, the MLCC and teacher decided it was best if meals were prepared and catered by Métis Crossing to increase the time available for doing activities. This trade off was made early in the process, but it is one the MLCC felt would enable greater attention to the tasks on the land, rather than cooking and cleaning.

After lunch, everyone returned to the campsite. The drying rack was almost complete and the MLCC began to show several adults how to cut bison rump into strips for drying. Compared to wild moose or deer, the grain fed bison meat proved to be a challenge, as cutting, and unravelling this delicate meat was a lengthy process. Once the adults grew tired, they trained apprentices to take over, and before dinner all the children happily engaged in cutting up the bison rump for smoking on the drying rack. As the meat was being cut into long thin strips the MLCC talked about the terms Métis people use to talk about meat, dry or smoked meat, pasteweyas, various ways people make pemmican and nutritional value it has.

While the adults were preparing the bison meat for drying the MLCC took a group of younger children into the forest to gather fallen birch or waskwiy, then a group of older children to collect wood, for the fire and willow for the rungs that would be used to smoke the bison meat strips. The children all arrived from the forest beaming because they contributed and learned how to locate a type of wood for the smoking fire. The students learned to differentiate between various types of willow, questioning why saskaoomina were absent from the branches, but fungus grew abundantly. The MLCC talked about the value of developing in children the power of becoming astute observers. In the past, children were encouraged to experience for themselves and learn to become sensitive to nuances they observed, rather than being directed to learning something that they would ultimately forget.

At around 4 pm, one of the interpreters from Métis Crossing who conducts jigging and fiddling sessions for visitors invited everyone to a party at one of the houses. This opportunity was prearranged by the teacher and MLCC, who knew the interpreter, to expose students to ©  
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what Métis families might do in the evening after the day's work was done. Some of the children dressed for the party while others pulled out their dancing shoes, maskisina. Rather than provide a contrived experience, the teacher and MLCC worked hard to ensure that children understood how the social experience fit into the everyday lives of Métis people.

The MLCC began the visit to the house by talking about his memory of fiddling and jigging as a youngster. He could not recall all the details of the fiddling and jigging, but one of the most important things he associates with the sounds is the feeling of sakihitowin, or love, when visiting his nichapan. To this day, he shared, it is not the performative aspects of fiddling or jigging that draws him in, it is the feelings of love, sahkitowin, he experienced. When the fiddling began, the MLCC showed the children the basic jigging steps; even the very shyest child tried. Prior to closing, the MLCC shared some of the Métis words that were used to describe, dancing alone, dancing in two's, quads etc. and how these words evolved over time.

After the fiddling and jigging were over, a fish dinner was consumed. The drying rack was then complete, and the smoking process commenced. Before bed, participants decided they wanted a fire to roast bison strips and marshmallows, so materials had to be gathered. The children dispersed to locate appropriate roasting sticks and more waskwiy, to start the fire. When darkness fell the MLCC and adults told stories about the constellations. One of the children, who rarely left the city was amazed by the number of stars seen in the country on a clear night. Others were awed by the number of shooting stars they saw in the night sky. It just so happened they were out at the tail end of meteor showers that awakened the usually quiet night sky.

For breakfast there were muffins, fruit, juice, cereal, and milk, but what about toasting bagels and making coffee? One of the older girls decided to start a fire to toast her bagels. It was a magical moment when the six-year-old student went over to the fire pit and said, "hmm, I think you need some waskwiy," and then went off to get her sister and another girl to collect waskwiy. Not only could the child identify the object in the Michif, but she could also demonstrate the appropriate kinship behaviors.

After breakfast, some of the children wanted to go to the river and see if they could catch a fish for dinner. The teacher helped the youngest ones prepare their rods for fishing, which included stringing the rod, putting on leaders, and then deciding on which hook to use.

The MLCC advised the children on which hooks had worked for him, and then the barbs had to be removed and then the discussion ensued about who was eligible to fish and why. Some of the older children went with the MLCC into the forest to collect more wood for the smoking process. The process of making breakfast and preparing rods for fishing was so time consuming that the teacher had enough time to construct maskisina from felt pieces she found in her sewing box for the six-year-old student. She had forgotten shoes and hated running around in her boots. Before lunch, everyone managed to prepare a rod for fishing in the afternoon.

After lunch, everyone went on the riverbank to watch the children fish. It was amazing to watch one of the older boys take on the role of teacher, showing the others how to cast and reel in slowly. Two girls, roughly the same age, each from different bubbles, took social distancing seriously, but nevertheless built a friendship on the riverbank. After a couple of hours of fishing, it was time to tear down camp and prepare it for transport. Once the items arrived at the top of the hill in the parking lot, it was time to pack up and express appreciation to newfound 'kin' and say goodbye.

Back in Class: Drawing on this rich cultural and linguistic experience

Student Activities

Reflection:

Keep a journal of the experience and then create a brochure, a photo essay or a podcast on a particular theme highlighted by the MLCC or teacher, such as building relations, working together, or simply sharing your experience, so that others might experience its richness.

Create a work of art or poetry expressing your feelings as you took part in one aspect of the experience, i.e. listening to the star stories under the night sky.

Inquiry:

Inquire into a specific aspect of the experience through books, visits, or calls to the MLCC, such as:



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1) gathering wood for smoking, or willow for roasting in the area, and explaining to others how to differentiate

2) identifying the various types of fish typically found in the North Saskatchewan river and detailing how they might be prepared for consumption

3) learning about the various types of plants growing in the area, such as plantain and its potential uses in the past or present.

To show off their learning, students might invite the MLCC, the elder, parents and peers into the classroom to see their finished products. The finished products may range from simple descriptors similar to the ones seen in parks but including information from the Indigenous perspective and language. Examples could include creating a scavenger hunt for their focus on identifying the various flora & fauna in the area; creating a video about the nutritional value of pemmican incorporating ratio and percent to influence consumption; or illustrating a cartoon depicting the Pemmican Wars after reading *Pemmican Wars: A Girl Called Echo* by Katherina Vermette.

### Conclusion

Decades of policy and strategy aimed at the assimilation of Métis people has created misinformed, distorted, narratives about the Métis Nation both historically and contemporarily. A simplistic them and-us narrative distances people to non-dualistic pedagogies in the classroom. Moving beyond this narrative is required to deepen and embed such fundamental structural change in people's minds. The teaching practice described here non-confrontationally engages students still constructing dualistic identities in Canada. This exercise involves learning experientially in a modern context, and weaving Métis ways of knowing and being into spaces for new generations of children to understand Métis language and culture.

Related Video:

[ILE RLI Region 2 - Land-Based Learning Camp](#)