



Stories from the Classroom

The spirit of inquiry

— Roland Case
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Some years ago, I was invited to visit a grade four class piloting a new resource. The students were nearing the end of their inquiry and wanted to share what they had learned. I arrived as they were engrossed in a discussion about traditional Aboriginal lifestyle. Not wanting to disturb them, I sat quietly in a small chair at the empty table near the front of the class, my knees scrunched awkwardly to the side.

Four tables were set up in the room, representing the options students had to decide among in answer to their inquiry question: *What was the quality of life of First Nations people prior to European contact?* Numerous students were sitting at the tables representing quality of life that was very high, good and so-so. But no one was sitting at the table with the conclusion that First Nations people had a poor quality of life. That table was empty—until I sat at it.

In the weeks leading up to my visit, students had been learning about the quality of life of a local First Nation. Rather than gathering facts from books, they had drawn inferences from oral traditions, archaeology, and historical drawings and photographs of traditional practices to reach their own conclusions about daily life. They considered questions like: *What were their main sources of food? Does their clothing and shelter seem adequate for the climate?* Working with others and consulting different sources, students gathered evidence to justify their conclusion about the group's quality of life.

On the day of my visit, students were presenting their conclusions and evidence to their peers. The atmosphere was one of alert scrutiny. Students were encouraged to move to a different table if they heard something that changed their minds, so they listened intently to their peers' reasoning. They sometimes looked past the speaker as they listened as though attempting to see beyond them, into the past.

I knew all about this lesson – it was one I helped create – and I watched and listened to the proceedings with interest. But seated alone at the poor quality of life table, I could not resist offering reasons for this unpopular conclusion. I stood up to deliver my argument, in my best professorial voice, my hands gesturing convincingly: The First Nation's daily life was inferior because they did not have roads, hospitals or restaurants—not even a Macdonald's.

As soon as I stopped talking, six students rushed to sit at my table, anxious to correct their imagined misperceptions. They sat down with me, seemingly relieved to have escaped being wrong. But most students glanced at each other with puzzled looks. Then, a tall girl with long hair stood up and with her shoulders straight started to speak. Politely and confidently, she explained that these people had an excellent transport system for people and supplies – they did not need expensive roads. Instead of hospitals, they had elders who knew about medicine and used many herbs and other aids in the forests around them; their health care was free. As for the absence of Macdonald's, she argued that the First Nations' philosophy of not wanting what they did not need meant that they did not miss hamburgers and fries.

I was out-argued by a nine year old, and her peers recognized it. Demonstrating independence and open-mindedness, the six students responded to the girl's compelling reasoning and deserted my table to take up a more sensible position.

As the discussion came to a close, another student captured the wonder that had emerged from their month-long study. Her head shaking in awe she proclaimed, “Wouldn’t it be awesome if we could travel back in time to find out what life was really like!”

What did these students learn from their experience with this inquiry? Were they engaged? Did they demonstrate critical thinking? Did they develop a deeper understanding of Aboriginal way of life? With support, prompting and focused instruction, not only were these grade four students excited by their inquiry, but in the course of learning to think more critically they acquired a fuller appreciation for the lives of the people they were studying.

Wouldn’t it be great if our classes were like this more often?

