

On a Métis Trapline in Northern Alberta

Steven Van Zoost

So there I was on a Métis trapline in northern Alberta with my Grade 12 English class. Tommy, our 58 year old host, was an ideal grandfather figure. “You don’t have to have snowpants to have fun!” he exclaimed. Tobogganing, snowmobiling, walking on the frozen rivers – the more fun we were having, the happier he became. His sister made us chili and his mother made us bannock for lunch. We ate in his cabin. Let me be clear: it was not my idea to visit the First Nations community of Fort McKay located in the Athabasca Oil Sands in the dead of winter. In truth, it was my students’ idea and it was their project – a “Youth Inquiry Project.”

One Friday in October, my students spoke with Casey Brown, the principal of the school in the small community of Fort McKay. The class had been thinking about women’s issues in Afghanistan and in our own communities; Casey Brown was helping us to understand what it was like to be a woman living in a First Nations community surrounded by the oil industry. After the phone call with Casey Brown, my students wanted to learn more about her community. “Can we go? Can we?” they asked. To be honest, I was a bit apprehensive of their interest, knowing the amount of work that such a project would demand. I asked them to come back on Monday with reasons outlining why they wanted to visit this community.

Each student had a different interest in learning more about Fort McKay. Some students were interested in the culture of the community, while others were interested in the impact of industry on the community. Several students were interested in social issues, while others were interested in the roles of media and technology in the community. One student was passionate about environmental issues. At this point, we called our framework a “Youth Inquiry Project” and it became an investigation into communities in the 21st century. While the students were interested in Fort McKay, their experience was living in Nova Scotia communities. The Youth Inquiry Project allowed students to think broadly about the role of

communities in today’s world, as well as think about their own participation in communities. Each of the students had a unique inquiry question that framed their thinking and experiences while visiting Fort McKay:

- What does the word *community* mean in the 21st century?
- What cultural characteristics are deemed important to pass on to younger generations?
- What is the importance of traditional culture to youth in a 21st century community?
- In what ways does local industry define a community?
- How does local industry influence young peoples’ attitudes towards post secondary education?
- How do communities address and respond to acts of discrimination and what are their resources?
- What tools do communities use when dealing with poverty?
- What does it mean to be a woman in a 21st century community?



This kind of student engagement in learning was powerful to witness.

- How can media be used to influence communities?
- How are communities represented in the media in the 21st century?
- What are the pros and cons of 21st century technology in a community?
- What responsibilities should communities assume in regard to the environment?

The students varied their questions as they met with Tommy, Casey Brown, community leaders, students, oil industry representative, and elders. They continued to make notes as they spoke informally to our shuttle drivers, waitresses, and pilots. They experienced snowshoeing, cross country skiing, swimming at the YMCA, and eating moose stew. The students visited the Oil Sands Discovery Centre, the Day Care Centre, the Wellness Centre, and the Elders Centre. They attended an Oil Barons hockey game in Fort McMurray and Family Night at the school in Fort McKay. In four days, they got to understand many of the complexities of their inquiry questions and had to sort through competing sources of information.

On our last day, we visited with elders in the community. It was quite an impressive scene. There were four elders in the room, each surrounded by a handful of my Grade 12 students with their notepads and smiles. The students were on the edges of their seats, showing deep interest in the elders' lives. When one elder told an emotional story about a problem in the community, the students cried. This kind of student engagement in learning was powerful to witness. Students had subsequent questions and concerns about their own communities back home in Nova Scotia. More immediately, students felt compelled to find ways to give back to the community of Fort McKay.

After our time with the elders, we went to the Wellness Centre where kids could play and have supper together. The Grade 12 students were generous with these kids: board games, make-up, music, reading, and small, personal chats. By the time the spaghetti was ready, the kids were bargaining about who would sit by my students. After supper, the students put all of their remaining

energy into the Family Fun Night as they facilitated the dancing, played more games with kids and parents, and shared their enthusiasm for being together. It was difficult that night to express our gratitude to our hosts, especially Casey Brown who was so generous with my students.

The results of this trip/project will be published in a book this spring called *21st Century Communities: A Youth Inquiry Project*, available on www.amazon.com. Each student has written a chapter in the book that responds to an inquiry question. These are not research essays; they are thinking projects. Students have thought about how their inquiry question is important to themselves as well as to other young people in communities. The anthology is also a collection of various essay structures used in high school writing: definition, classification, expository, informative, narrative, compare/contrast, expository, persuasive, and argumentative essays. Students also created a documentary of the inquiry project. The documentary follows what happens to learning when students are involved in shaping how curriculum outcomes can be addressed through students' own inquiry questions.

Pedagogically speaking, I felt like Tommy, the Métis trapper we met in Alberta. As we tobogganed down the hill, he would give us a great big push. In his excitement, his push would leave him lying on his belly, arms stretched in front of him, covering his jeans in snow: "You don't need to have snowpants to have fun!" As I watched my students initiate and follow through on this Youth Inquiry Project, I too wanted to give a great big push. I was caught up in the momentum of their learning and wanted to watch my students speed down the hill in excitement. I know that the laughing I heard coming from around the bend of the hill ensured that they would make the journey again and that they would continue to initiate their own learning long after their high school graduation.

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