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Aboriginal curriculum project focuses on local roots for Fraser-Cascade students

The Fraser-Cascade School District overlaps two Aboriginal territories with rich histories and cultures. Stretching from Agassiz-Harrison to Boston Bar, and including Hope, it's home to both Stó:lō and Nlaka'pamux people and traditions.

But when it came time to teach Aboriginal studies throughout the curriculum, much of what was available was based on traditions from outside the area.

"We wanted to be able to offer a curriculum that reflected the local people, culture, crafts, singing, and dancing," said Rod Peters, the district Aboriginal education coordinator. So the Fraser Cascade administrators asked Aboriginal Access Services at the University College of the Fraser Valley to collaborate on a curriculum development project that incorporated Nlaka'pamux and Stó:lō content.

UCFV Aboriginal Access coordinator Shirley Hardman took on the challenge, recruited a team, and participated in the project. "I thought this looked like a group project so I decided to ask some recent Halq'emeylem proficiency certificate graduates to work together along with some other good resource people," Hardman said.

The team consisted of Stó:lō educators Laura Kelly and Vivian Williams; Barbara Hance, a teacher of Nlaka'pamux heritage; administrative assistant Josephine Charlie; and coordinator Laura Smith, a retired School District 34 administrator now working in UCFV's Aboriginal Access Centre. They also consulted with Paul Orłowski, head of UCFV's new Teacher Education program.

The Fraser-Cascade district had already laid the groundwork by interviewing Aboriginal resource people who currently visit students in district classrooms, sharing and demonstrating Aboriginal culture. As a result of the interviews, 12 topics became the focus of the curriculum project. The UCFV team members selected from such topics as fishing, cedar, archeology, Elders, Nlaka'pamux art and cultural leadership, Chehalis and Stó:lō stories, and slaha:l. The UCFV team then embarked on a research path. Some of the methods employed included talking to the resource people, searching libraries, exploring archives, and interviewing local Elders.

The end result is a curriculum package consisting of primary, intermediate, and secondary units for each Aboriginal resource person in the district. It will also be available for teachers to use and will be offered to the local independent First Nation community schools.

"It was great to work with people who had the history and the knowledge from their own personal experience, and to have them help formalize it into a curriculum," said Peters of the Fraser-Cascade district. As for the women who worked on the project, it was a dream come true for them.

"I've worked in the Fraser Valley for years and am very familiar with Stó:lō culture, but this was a chance to do more about my own Nlaka'pamux culture, so it was a great opportunity," said Hance, who is originally from Lytton. She took the NITEP teacher education program at UBC, and taught NITEP students through UCFV. "This project has brought me full circle, in that I've learned, taught, and now researched Nlaka'pamux culture."

Doing the research also reinforced with the women how rooted they are to this area. "It makes you realize the importance of history," says Hance. "One of the leaders I talk about in my project was one of my ancestors."

Laura Kelly has a similar experience. "I was doing a pit house story, and when I went to the Stó:lō Nation to research archeological data, the case study that the worker there -- who happened to be my cousin -- gave me was about my great-great-grandfather's pit house near Hope."

For Kelly, the project was also a chance to integrate Halq'eméylem into the units she developed, continuing her passion for reviving the language of the Stó:lō people. Currently, Kelly teaches in three First Nations kindergarten classes for the Chilliwack School District.

"I believe our language is the foundation of Stó:lō education. Without it, we're not rooted to our culture. Knowing the basics of it gives us something to build on. I hope to see the children I'm introducing the language to coming in to UCFV in a dozen years and taking the university-level courses in Halq'eméylem."

Kelly, who married into a family on the Soowahlie reserve, grew up in Chehalis and has many friends and relatives there, so she took the job of developing a curriculum for Fraser-Cascade students very seriously.

"As a teacher I develop my own lesson plans all the time. This curriculum project was a little more stressful, but also empowering, knowing that other people would be teaching it. I know that if it's picked up and used in Agassiz, my friends' kids and eventually my grandchildren will be learning from it, so I took my job very seriously."

For Vivian Williams, who lives at and works for the Cheam First Nation, the project was also a chance to help preserve and teach the Halq'eméylem language. This summer she will be teaching the language to Cheam children, and she hopes to teach adults this fall. "I learned a lot from this curriculum project and was proud to be part of it," she said.

Williams' mother is one of the few Stó:lō fluent speakers left who can translate Halq'eméylem "in her head" without the aid of glossaries, and Williams herself was brought up for some years by her grandmother, who was also fluent.

The curriculum project isn't the only Aboriginal initiative in the Fraser Cascade School District with a UCFV connection. Mark Point, vice principal for Aboriginal education, took part of his teacher training through the NITEP program at UCFV in the 1990s and was also acting Aboriginal access coordinator for UCFV in 2006. He's now teaching a locally developed course, Oral History of the Stó:lō, as well as First Nations Studies 12.

For Rod Peters of the Fraser-Cascade School District, it's all about embedding Aboriginal content into the curriculum for all students, not segregating Aboriginal students to learn about their culture. "We gave a blanket with the house post emblem on it to all the 2006 and 2007 grads of Agassiz secondary as a symbolic gesture.