

## I Am What I Teach, Canadian

I will admit that I am not over 1,119 years old, I don't live in a cabin and I don't have a pet moose. But I do have a couple of horses, a dog, a cat and, at times, other small animals. I live in a house on an acreage near the mountains, and from time to time I have had to mark by a kerosene lamp, so I tell my students to write in 12–14 point Arial font so that I can see in the dark, especially because sometimes my pet moose gets in the way of my lamp and casts a shadow on their work. I tell them that I am over 1,000 years old, and that they have to practise their best writing so I can read it in my crowded dim cabin. I also tell them that if the weather gets bad, I will ride my horse to work. But if they are looking at me closely, they will notice me winking. Yes, I am a Canadian teacher with an imagination.

I have been seen walking in the hallways in a buckskin fringed coat. I have also been caught in a Jesuit gown complete with a hanging belt cross or a prairie teacher's outfit with the little round glasses on the tip of my nose and my hair in a bun. My students know by these clues that social studies class will be interesting because they will likely meet a historical person. One of my students commented, "I never used to like social studies, Ms G S, until..." I had to agree. When I was growing up, studying Canadian history was one level up from chewing mouldy bread. I assured myself

that given the chance I would be a unique teacher and inspire my students.

My students have used as many senses as possible to help them retain the curriculum. One year, my students from each class voted and decided that a campfire was the smell of Canadian history, because when the students came to class, I placed a smoke-infused pillowcase by the window so the aroma would drift into the classroom.

My husband has even helped me occasionally. He has been seen wafting pillowcases over the fire in the back acre to infuse them with smoke. I kept his moose and deer horns in my classroom for a year and have brought in our antique items to share with the students.

For one class I brought in items related to the history unit we were studying. We passed the items around in a talking circle and discussed how each one was made and why and how it was related to the history unit. That chapter's quiz required the students to reach into a box or envelope to retrieve an object, and without looking identify and correctly spell the name of the object. That was by far the most favourite assessment the students told me they "suffered" all year.

I have brought in moose meat, dried seaweed and real maple



syrup, and have hung herbs and other plants at the back of my classroom to make my special tea to share with them. This came in handy during our unit on fur trapping. Some students remember me yelling at them, "Don't trip on the moose horns!" because they were too heavy to hang on the school wall.

With each chapter, I added more artifacts to the walls to trigger their memories of what they read. In some cases they were intrigued by new items they had never seen. By the end of the year every wall was covered in historical maps and artifacts. By sight alone, the students could retell everything they studied by glancing up in my room.

Once, the students made their own mini-museum. Each student had to share one aspect of that chapter by creating a hands-on item and attaching information about it, much like a real museum. They had their desktop to fill. The students were thrilled



to be able to create their own displays to share. Of course the teacher's favourite was always the heritage food recipes, with samples from home kitchens. I must thank my past principal who supplied me with \$1,000 worth of classroom books for my students to research their museum artifacts. The students pored over those books ravenously in order to participate and continued to go back to them for reference, as have the students every year since.

The following year I ordered class sets of the Dear Canada series for reading time. Now my homeroom students could follow the diaries of young teenagers going through Canadian historical events. We did readers' theatre with these books every morning. We've done arts and crafts with supplies and instructions from an Albertan Métis woman artist. We have listened to and learned old songs from days gone by.

In those years I was able to enrich my curriculum dramatically. I was not beyond acting out a history character with full accent, and at times, full costume. Sometimes my past principal brought in visitors to my room to share the excitement. He was proud of my work. The students were never late to class and would trip over each other to get into their desks, ready to take notes. The principal was pleased with my eager students. As well, the principal knew that he might be invited to witness the students re-enacting some of the scenes we were studying. He was always supportive of his students and staff, and I loved to show off my class.

This may all sound entertaining and fun but in the end, the students had rewritten the entire text in note form. They had scoured over each chapter and accompanying pictures with such vigour that even now they can recite the story, date, places and events with every historical

name mentioned. They knew which research books were valuable for information. They excelled at their grade level achievement test. My students were also able to relay Canadian history in 90 seconds using hand signals and one sum-up sentence per signal.

These were my ESL students who can now write and talk their way around any topic about Canadian history curriculum taught in Grade 7. There was never a complaint that they had to rewrite the entire text in note form or essay format. I was an inspired teacher who must thank those who supported me. We have a completely new administration now, and I can be found tapping my chin thinking, what can I do within their new very different vision?

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*Susan is a history enthusiast, horse fancier and devotee of the country life.*