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FIRST PEOPLES PRINCIPLES

Truth Telling at Living History Sites

Meagan Innes & Sanya Pleshakov

Burnaby is the shared territory of numerous First Nations. However, our colonial past was all too effective in driving out many of the Indigenous people who called these lands home and in maintaining that status quo. Settler narratives have suppressed these historical realities, both in Burnaby schools and the Burnaby Village Museum. Working respectively as a K-12 teacher and as a museum educator, we have spent time considering how children learn about colonialism and Indigenous ways of knowing. When we reflect on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action, we believe we are still very much in the early days of truth telling.

Burnaby Village Museum is a living history site in Metro Vancouver that represents a small settler community in the 1920s. Costumed interpreters engage close to 150,000 visitors a year in the homes and shops of a ten-acre historical village. Recognizing that the museum's settler narrative has fundamentally contributed to the erasure of Indigenous history in Burnaby, staff saw educational initiatives as a way to start righting this wrong. In 2017, the museum launched new Indigenous programming for schools based on the First Peoples Principles of Learning. This set of nine pedagogical values

reflect a respectful and holistic approach to teaching and learning. They were developed by the First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC). Today, these principles are used with all learners in the school system; they are foundational to the revised BC curriculum.

The process of creating new Indigenous programming at Burnaby Village Museum has taken years of consultation and there are many collaborators at the table today. Museum staff have partnered with several local First Nations, including Tsleil-Waututh, Musqueam, Squamish, and Kwantlen, as well as with Burnaby School District's Indigenous education team. These partnerships are not just institutional, but highly personal. They are based on museum staff being vulnerable, honest, and genuinely caring when spending time with First Nations staff, artists, and community members, sharing reflections about history, colonialism, and reconciliation, and slowly building trust. For museum staff, nurturing these relationships in a good way is their single most important goal. It trumps project deadlines, exhibit timelines, and forms the basis of all decisions made around programming.

Indigenous educator Carleen Thomas teaching students a traditional dance.
Photo credit: Leanne Scherp, courtesy of Burnaby Village Museum (BVM)

Reconciliation and Education

“Education has gotten us into this mess, and education will get us out.” Senator Murray Sinclair

Murray Sinclair, as the Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, has been vocal that education is the key to walking on this journey of reconciliation. He reminds us that teachers have a sacred responsibility to ensure that all children, regardless of heritage, should explore four key questions throughout their education: Where do I come from? Where here am I going? Why am I here? Who am I? Education systems should be designed to help children answer these very basic, yet profound, questions. Reconciliation is a loaded term that comes with pain, suffering and a deep sorrow that does not ease with time. In reconciling, we learn the multilayered, complexity of trauma and survival. We now understand that residential school survivors have not just survived; they are still surviving. This paradigm shift allows us to reframe the notion of reconciliation with the deep knowledge that each individual surviving carries their own personal experiences that in turn redefine the term for us.

As educators, we can no longer shy away from the truth. Our students need to know about the cultural genocide—the physical, emotional, spiritual, and sexual abuses inflicted on Indigenous peoples in Canada—that continues to affect generations. These truths have been missing from our historical narratives, our textbooks and our education system for too long. We must create age-appropriate resources that are creatively differentiated to address these truths. Canadians need to work together in the process of reconciliation, with the goal of creating a renewed relationship based on mutual understanding and respect.

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— Senator Murray Sinclair





Indigenous educator Meagan Innes teaching students to count in Skwxwú7mesh sníchim.

Photo credit: Leanne Scherp, courtesy of BVM

First Peoples Principles of Learning

Indigenous educator T'uy't'ananat-Cease Wyss.

Photo credit: Leanne Scherp, courtesy of BVM

FNESC is comprised of many Indigenous educators, scholars, knowledge keepers, and strong leaders all dedicated to creating, providing and reviewing appropriate resources, which authentically reflect Indigenous worldviews and perspectives in many areas of education. One of those resources, the First Peoples Principles of Learning, reflect the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, including the call to “integrate Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods into classrooms” and “build student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy and mutual respect.”

Through the guidance of the First Peoples Principles of Learning, students have begun to see parallels between themselves, their families and Indigenous peoples and communities. Learners see how traditional techniques and knowledge are very much alive in society today and that Indigenous peoples continue to build on these traditional teachings. For educators, following the First Peoples Principles of Learning is one place to start integrating Indigenous pedagogies into classroom and museum environments that have traditionally left them out. As educators, we are working together to find ways our learning can fit into Indigenous ways of knowing.

Creating Indigenous Space in the Village

The Indigenous space at Burnaby Village Museum is meant to be a place of welcome. It is contemporary with painted black silhouettes representing animals considered important to local First Nations. Animal names appear on the walls in both hənqəmínəh and Skwxwú7mesh sníchim. An intentional effort was made to keep the look modern instead of trying to recreate an exhibit “authentic” to the era, one which might stereotype Indigenous people as people of the past. There is very little interpretation or explanation in the space—no curatorial voice that might overpower others. Rather, it is a place for Indigenous staff and community members to engage with students on their own terms.

Indigenous programming in a 1920s settler village may seem incongruous. Certainly, doing so without the benefit of purpose-built exhibits comes with its challenges. But it is precisely because the space does not fit perfectly with everyone's idea of a 1920s settler village that it can challenge assumptions about easy settler narratives conveniently absent of Indigenous people. It forces visitors to stop and think about why it might seem awkward to encounter Indigenous space on the main street of the village. Its central location makes the point that despite governments efforts to keep Indigenous and non-Indigenous

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Students explore a map of what the lands now called Burnaby may have looked like in the past.

Photo credit: Leanne Scherp, courtesy of BVM



people separate with the colonial tools of the (not so distant) past—reserves, residential schools, incarceration—Indigenous people never “vanished” from the land we now call Burnaby. Indigenous people found ways to occupy urban space in the past, and they are still deeply connected to these lands today.

Framing Indigenous Learning

In developing new Indigenous programming, museum staff worked closely with a group of Burnaby teachers and members of the district’s Indigenous education team. This process has been one of collaboration, deep inquiry and hard questions to ponder. The museum has implemented all requests made from the Teachers Focus Group in making space for dialogue around our shared history, the hard truths of colonization, and settler roles in colonialization. It was these teachers who introduced museum staff to the First Peoples Principles of Learning, which became a way of framing the new space and program delivery.

“Learning is focused on connectedness and a sense of place.” It is important for the new programming to concentrate on Indigenous history specific to Burnaby. Instead of using the wide lens of Coast Salish peoples, the programming focuses on the history of the *hən̓q̓əmiṇ̓əm* and *Skwxwú7mesh* people of these lands. The museum’s First Nations partners felt strongly about making this point and helped provide language that was specific, yet inclusive. Now when museum interpreters start every school program by acknowledging the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the *hən̓q̓əmiṇ̓əm* and *Skwxwú7mesh* people, it firmly roots visitors in a sense of this place.

“Learning recognizes the importance of Indigenous knowledge.” It has been essential to engage local Indigenous people in designing the space, developing programming, and delivering it. With this in mind, Burnaby Village

Museum hired a team of Indigenous cultural workers and knowledge keepers. Museum staff were honoured to have Carleen Thomas, T'uy't'tanat-Cease Wyss, and Senaqwila Wyss as the museum's first Indigenous educators. They helped define the space and the programming there today. For example, the Indigenous educators taught museum staff that the cedar boughs they wanted to adorn the entrances of the space have important spiritual value. When new cedar was brought in, they took the old cedar to put back into the earth and waters in keeping with traditional protocol. It was also important that the Indigenous educators appear as the contemporary knowledge keepers they are. They dress in comfortable clothes they choose in contrast with the museum's interpreters who wear period costumes. We know how important and sacred regalia is, and that where and when it is worn is deeply personal. In terms of program development, there is neither script nor detailed program guidelines. Each Indigenous educator comes to the space with their own gifts and their own comfort level in sharing different kinds of knowledge.

"Learning involves recognizing that some knowledge is sacred and is only shared with permission and/or in certain situations." While the museum's Indigenous educators share their own personal knowledge with students, museum interpreters do not yet have permission to discuss in-depth knowledge of Burnaby's Indigenous history with visitors. Including the truth about the land we explore in and around the museum is not easy. Because very little was known about this history at the time, museum staff asked several local First Nations for permission to carry out a research project on the topic. Dr. Sharon Fortney was instrumental in conducting this research on behalf of the museum. Two years later, the research has been reviewed several times by the museum's First Nations partners as well as the district's Indigenous education team, and a resource guide is now close to publication. "Learning involves patience and time."

Who Is Holding You Accountable?

When we started this project, we may have thought of this work as reconciliation, but we now realize we are only in the beginning stages of a nation-wide process that will take generations. Reconciliation means different things to different people, and as we gain new knowledge, our own understanding of the term changes. We see the process beginning with truth telling, and moving to a new space that is inclusive, based on mutual respect, and meaningful relationships.

When we do our work in museums and education, it is important to reflect on who is holding us accountable. The relationships and trust that we have built in our respective worlds is key. We think of those Indigenous elders, knowledge keepers, leaders, and community members who expect us to do this work in a good way; we do not want to disappoint them. We recognize that the knowledge they share is a gift, one that we hold as sacred, and that we owe much in return. When you do your work, think about: What is your next step? What is holding you back? Who is holding you accountable?

Indigenous educator Senaqwila Wyss leading a medicine plant walk around the village.

*Photo credit:
Photo by Jennifer Gauthier, courtesy of BurnabyNow*





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MEAGAN INNES

Meagan is currently on educational leave from her position as the Indigenous Enhancement Teacher for Burnaby SD41 K-12. This leave is a gift that is providing her time and a space to be a student again so she can learn her traditional language Skwxwú7mesh Sníchim through SFU's First Nations Language Proficiency Certificate. Meagan is also completing her Master's degree in Education, which explores the possibility of reshaping classroom instruction to include a more holistic embodiment of what education can look like in relation to traditional ways of learning, more specifically traditional Squamish Nation ways of learning.

Indigenous educator T'uy't'tanat-Cease Wyss leading a medicine plant walk around the village.
Photo credit: Leanne Scherp, courtesy of BVM



SANYA PLESHAKOV

Sanya is head of programming and education at Burnaby Village Museum. She has worked with Indigenous communities on museum programs and exhibits in New Zealand, Malawi, Washington State, and British Columbia. As the daughter of newcomers, she is committed to fostering understanding and respect through education about our shared past. For her Master's research, she worked in collaboration with the Musqueam First Nation on the history of settler colonialism and public memory in Vancouver.