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CELEBRATING AND EXPLORING MICHIGAN HISTORY THROUGH WRITING

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In the past year, I have worked with the French teacher at my high school to plan and implement an interdisciplinary unit that combines English, French, and history. This unit has a decidedly Michigan flavor, and so we offer it to *LAJM* readers interested in a similar classroom adventure.

At the start of the 2002-2003 school year, each teacher at Houghton Lake High School was challenged to create a unit that would improve MEAP scores, follow the Michigan Benchmarks and Frameworks, and meet the “No Child Left Behind” requirements. It was quite a challenge for all teachers, new and veterans alike! This task was especially a challenge for me, though, because I didn’t want to “only” improve MEAP scores; I wanted an enjoyable learning experience, on that moved students away from textbooks and questions, and required that they use more hands-on learning.

After studying English and history MEAP scores and data, it became clear that the students in my school district have difficulty connecting to the world around them. Their writing has usually been unimaginative, lacking depth and detail. In addition, I discovered that the content literacy scores were low in both English and history. The three major comments from scored tests were revealing:

ideas/content need to have relevant details

Competent response- needs more reflection

Competent response- needs more detail and examples.

I went to the French teacher with a concept and a plea for help. We started brainstorming and

quickly came up with some innovative concepts. Our project idea was to move away from traditional learning styles and have students step into history. Living in a small community our students seem to live in a bubble. They rarely react to world events; feeling safe in our small town. We wanted to help our students make a personal connection with the world and other cultures. It was our hope that students would write with more detail and more thoroughly on the MEAP test if they could expand their knowledge base about Michigan history! and cultures around the world. We developed a team-taught unit that would focus on Michigan history, French, and writing. The following article details our unit plan and how we implemented it.

Getting Started:

Our first step was a map project designed to investigate the route French fur traders and missionaries took when they first arrived in Michigan during the 1600s. To that end, we distributed full-size Michigan maps, divided students into groups of three, and asked them to identify any city, river, or island with a French name. The students jumped into the activity with great fervor. History books were opened, conversations and discussions were held, and highlighters flew as they worked on finding every city or county with a French name. Here are just a few they identified: *Sault St. Marie, Pt. Aux Barques, Detroit, Adair, St. Ignace, Pontiac, Grosse Point, Bois Blanc Island, St. Clair, Charlevoix, and Port Sanilac*

Students enjoyed this playful, hands-on activity, and it clearly demonstrated that French settlers followed the waterways. With three distinct routes and many French explorers to research, the students set out to learn about Michigan history and the French influence.

Part of the adventure was for students to investigate why the settlers had given certain locations particular names. With a little help from a French dictionary, this was not beyond our students. After all, “Presque Isle”, which means “almost an island”, is practically an island except for the few acres that separate Grand Lake and Lake Huron.

Bois Blanc, which means “white woods”, was once filled with White Pines, Birch trees, and White-tailed deer, and no one can deny that Grand Traverse Bay is a “long crossing.” Detroit which means “strait”, is located on a river separating Lake Erie and Lake Huron. However, Lake St. Clair is located between the river and Lake Huron, which makes the area resemble a strait. And one final example is River Rouge, so named for two reasons: the water color after a fierce battle and the soil/rock color reflected in the water.

Expanding Knowledge:

After the initial map activity, students spent several weeks researching the French influence in Michigan history (see Appendix A for useful Internet and text sources). In conjunction with their research, they completed a variety of different activities. Here are three representative examples:

- Create a Travel Route- Pretending they were explorers, students wrote instructions for a travel route. The instructions included a legend and clearly defined starting and finishing points on the map. Students also had to write instructions/directions for their friends. They needed to describe how many days the trip took, the amount of provisions needed on the trip, and other important facts that would help fellow travelers.
- Write a Daily letter- Taking on the persona of a French settler, each student wrote a daily letter to loved ones back in France. They were asked to express feelings and explain things they had seen in the New World. From this assignment came daily journaling. The students role-played each day stepping into the life of their new persona and writing journal entries about daily happenings/ events. Students incorporated information they learned in the day’s lesson to demonstrate their new knowledge.

- Keep Financial Log- Using Internet resources, students kept the financial records of a fur trader. To accomplish this task, they had to take into consideration what number of animals might be trapped and what the expenses and sales would be.

These activities helped students in three ways. First, they helped them better understand the time period and the French settlers. Second, the activities gave our students a chance to experiment with different voices, genres, and audiences. Last, the activities were fun, so they kept students focused and engaged.

Project/Presentation:

After weeks of studying Michigan history and French settlers our students were given their major project. They were required (A) to pick an explorer and his/her route or (B) explore the occupation of fur trapping and place themselves in that situation. They could use their previous activities to help them describe their daily activities, experiences of hardship and successes, sights they saw, and whatever else they found important to explain to make the experience personal. The students gathered data and began working on their project. All factual information was documented, primary sources were preferred. In the end, students didn’t simply read their reports; they gave a presentation describing their journeys. They provided maps and other visual aids to make their trip more real and personal. Some items that students brought to enhance their presentation included ones such as for

Fur Trapper: Snowshoes, fur pelts, fur hats, pictures, maps, and sleds;

Missionary Pere Jacques Marquette:

Farming items and produce, pictures, maps, books and documents describing missions;

Explorers Louis Jolliet Rene-Robert de La

Salle Etienne Brule Cadillac: Oars that they used to paddle their boat down the river, beads and trinkets from trades with local Indian tribes, survival guides of Michigan’s wilderness explaining foods that were edible

and plants that were poisonous, pictures, maps, and letters/journal entries.

Our students were extremely creative with their presentation and it was obvious that most enjoyed the assignment and put a great deal of time into their work.

Assessing Students' Progress:

Before embarking on this classroom adventure, my colleague and I pre-tested our students' knowledge of Michigan history and French culture, and we tried to assess how successfully they could express personal connections in primarily informative writing. As might be expected, we were starting at the very beginning. After completing final presentations, students took post-tests, and we are happy to report that the scores reflected an increased awareness of both Michigan history and French culture. Equally exciting, students' tests suggest they are better able to make personal connections when writing short answer and essay questions regarding world and other cultures. Will MEAP scores next year reflect this increased ability? We can only wait and see. As of this date, however, we are hopeful students' content literacy scores will improve.

In addition to assessing knowledge, we asked our students for feedback on the unit and they gave us high praise. They claimed that they liked combining English, French, and Michigan history, and they also found it beneficial to write in the role of an historical figure. One student's comment was representative of his classmates: "I learned more from this project and unit than I would have from (traditional) readings, lectures, questions, and tests."

Conclusion:

What does it mean to teach English in the state of Michigan? On most days, it is probably the same as teaching English in any of the other states. Teaching writing processes and products, literature survey courses, and public speaking skills. These are just a few of the curricular items that English teachers across the country teach their students each and every year. This semester, however, I had the opportunity to incorporate Michigan history in my

English classes. The classroom adventure was worth the additional work on my part and the necessary collaboration with a trusted colleague.

Resources for Teachers

French Vocabulary in English. Lawless, Laura K.
<<http://French.about.com/library/bl-frenchinenglish-list.html>>

Michigan in Brief. "Economy and Culture"
<<http://www.Michigan.gov>>

Michigan Historical Museum.
< <http://www.Michigan.gov>>

River of History Museum.
< <http://history.eup.k12.mi.us/local/river/gallery3.html>>

The Museum of Cultural and Natural History. <<http://www.museum.cmich.edu>>

Words in English: Loanwords.
<<http://www.ruf.rice.edu/~kemmer/words/loanwords.html>>

Romig, Walter. *Michigan Place Names: The History of the Founding and the Naming of More Than Five Thousand Past and Present Michigan Communities.* Detroit: Wayne State University. 1986