

# The Story Unfolds - Blanket Exercise Reflection

May 4th, 2019 - Emily Janzen

I am Canadian. This has been the truth for me since my birth, and for generations back into my ancestry. My parents, grandparents, great grandparents; all of them have all inhabited this country for most if not all of their lives. These factors make it seem apparent that I am Canadian, that the land around me is my native home, and that I have every right to it. However, I have recently come to an understanding that this is not the full picture. Although I am Canadian, my family was not one of the first people to live on this land. We were not the first to walk in the natural wonder around us, not the first to spread our culture, and definitely not the first to create a livelihood here. This is a title which goes to The First Nations of Canada. Recently, the Grade 10 classes of our school, which are made up of Canadians from all different backgrounds, had our eyes opened to this fact. First generation or fifth, coloured or white, each and every one of us who are not First Nations discovered that we do not have the right of calling ourselves native Canadians. We were settlers, immigrants, and unfortunately many of us have ancestors who invaded and robbed from the first peoples. This was something that we were able to realize through the Blanket Exercise.

On Thursday, May 2nd, our classes were called down to the library to meet with two First Nation individuals. We were each told to bring a blanket, and connect them together on the floor to create a large island. Then, we were told to stand on our blankets. As we stood, the two individuals began to tell us the story of Canada and it's native people, with us representing them, and our blankets representing Canada. At first, we were free to walk wherever we pleased over the large island. There were around 40 people participating in this activity, but there was plenty of room to move. Then, the individuals who were representing colonialists began to kick our blankets aside. We couldn't walk around anymore, and had to stay close together. As time went on, some of the people could not "survive" in these new conditions, and were forced to leave their blankets. Some had to stand separate from the others, driven away from their "communities", and some had to stand on areas which were much too small for them. In the end, only five or six people were still in the activity, and their blankets had been folded into tiny, isolated squares.

I am truly grateful that I got the chance to participate in this exercise. Before it started, I was expecting that I was going to be entering a bland, over-detailed history lecture which covered many topics which I already knew. I thought that it would serve no purpose to me other than to summarize the government mandate history curriculum which we had explored in detail many times, but this was completely wrong. This exercise's purpose, although yes, was partially teach us about history, was really

meant to inform us about the problems indigenous communities face today. It was to show us the domino effect which led to all the modern turmoil that we as a society far too often blame on the individuals affected by it, and was also to allow us, to some extent, live these events ourselves. There wasn't a moment of this for me that wasn't an eye opening learning experience. Although I did know about many of the events that were spoken about, such as the Métis revolts and the fur trade, I did not have a comprehensive timeline of how they all fit together. I had no idea that things such as the Indian Act was one of the direct factors which led to residential schools, and certainly had no idea of how painfully long it took for some of these conflicts to be resolved. What I found most shocking however, was the actual numbers that came with these events. I had known that smallpox ravaged native communities in the 1800's, but I had no idea that around 90% of the population was wiped out. I knew the Squamish band was much smaller than some of the other nations in Canada, but had no knowledge up that it was roughly 12 families who formed it, due to the rest of their population dying off.

There were many statistics, events, and people spoken about during this activity that helped broaden my understanding of Canadian First Nations, which I feel is necessary for me as a Canadian to understand. However, something that I feel is more important for me to take away from this, is a new perspective of our countries' history. Beforehand, hearing about colonialism in Canada made me think of two things; a time long ago which might as well have existed during Mesopotamia, and brave explorers discovering and building in new lands. I knew that there were injustices against native communities, but I had always thought that in the end, fair agreements were made, and things were handled with morality and civility. I now realize however, that this is only a facade. The reason that it appears that things were handled in a civil manner, is because many Europeans quietly silenced native revolts through often brutal and harsh means. The so called brave heroes that "discovered" this land, the "founders of Canada" were really just commanders of groups who had greater fire power, greater external knowledge, and greater numbers, which gave them an unfair ability to take advantage of the situation. Knowing this has shifted the way that I see modern Canada, not necessarily or better or for worse, but to a place where I can have a much more realistic view of the world around me. I now will not blindly judge those who are struggling due to these events, and have a framework to build off of if I come across opportunities to help. However, from talking with the people around me, it appears that I was not alone in my aforementioned view of colonialism. To this day, it seems that many Canadians know little to nothing about these life-altering events, and this was pretty devastating for me to realize. I have thought, because through activities in our education such as the Blanket Exercise, our generation and future generations can slowly but surely develop an understanding of what really needs to happen in order to reconcile. With knowledge, comes power, but this time we can use this power for good.