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## Experientially Teaching Canadian Travel Literature

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Bob Henderson guided his first canoe trip approximately 50 years ago with a children's summer camp. These early guiding experiences led to a curiosity for the educational qualities of outdoor travel. He has stayed true to this imaginative spark, over five decades, by teaching at various Canadian universities, primarily McMaster, and guiding for a variety of outdoor programs. Bob has authored books concerning Canadian heritage travel stories and the philosophical conceptualization of outdoor learning.

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*The pleasantest of all diversions is to sit alone under the lamp, a book spread out before you, and to make friends with people of a distant past you have never known. – The Tsurezuregusa of Kenko*

I am fond of the expression I first heard from Pete Seeger in speaking of his fellow folk songwriter Woody Guthrie; "Any damn fool can get complicated, but it takes genius to attain simplicity" (Haslam, 1971). Thinking of teaching generally, the "simplest" determinants of success are twofold: firstly, you must love people, and secondly, you must love your subject. This is not complicated. For the purposes of this paper, I complicate that just a little bit. Firstly, you must love engaging people experientially in the nature and manner of the inquiry in question, and secondly, you must love your subject –must,

in other words, build a relationship such that the subject and students and you are stretched to move beyond the facts and details to the broader inquiry out to where their world is. That still sounds simple enough.

I taught Outdoor Education and Environmental Inquiry to senior students in a Canadian university kinesiology program and in an arts-and-science degree program. All courses involve field experience to complement the direct classroom time and assignments. I will consider here two courses with extended field-trip experience; a summer nine-day canoe-travel course (roughly forty students break up into five groups) and a winter travel course of seven days for one large group of twelve to eighteen. It is hard to teach outdoor education in the classroom and best to teach travel literature on the trail. These points

proved to win over a predominantly bioscience faculty that was initially reluctant.

Small-group travel experiences by canoe and snowshoe inevitably involve learning in four basic components: some technical skills (travel mode and camping), social skills, self-awareness, and place-based education. In outdoor education, place-based education is most easily neglected, though I, for one, believe it is equally important. Once the technical, social, and self-awareness aspects settle into place (more or less a given to my mind in a well-run travel experience), one can attend to place-based curricular aspects. Where are we? Who has been here before us? How did they live and travel? How has this place been perceived and understood imaginatively through time in the written word and as oral storytelling? Students begin to open up to literature, folklore, history, anthropology, archaeology, and geography not so much as subjects but as lived experiences. Their world becomes a bigger place in time and space. Sparking their imagination is a healthy part of all this. Mostly we explore travel literature by telling stories on the trail and around campfires.

Our place for travel and inquiry is the North Woods regions of Ontario, Temagami, and Algonquin in the Canadian Shield. This place, the North Woods of the Canadian Shield, encompass close to three-quarters of the Canadian landscape. This means you can, at times, be specific to Temagami or Algonquin and also address stories of summer canoe travel and winter-snowshoe and dog-team travel for a large part of Canada as a whole. I will always remember the moment on the last day of the trip when a student who had mostly known urban environments in Canada commented from the canoe something like “so this is what it looks like, most of the blue and green on all the maps of Canada look mostly like this. Wow!” Now that is something to learn and a necessary precursor to any study of Canadian literature and of heritage study generally.

What follows are curricular ideas for courses from the trail and classroom that distill an awareness of a self-propelled traveler’s place in Cana-

dian travel heritage. For most students a new literary genre is being introduced, travel literature. To this literature, they add their own stories of travels on the trail.

### Peppering the Trail with Heritage

*I enjoyed the numerous readings. I felt that they gave a sense of Canadian tradition. The stories were a good reminder of who came before us. Stopping to see the pictographs and the axe markings on trees at portages [blazes] gave us a good visual of the same idea. It was interesting to learn about the places we were visiting instead of just passing through. We didn’t pass by just another lake anymore. The places became unique. They became real places with history that others had discovered before us, that they had built up and that they experienced. – Angelina*

On the trail we are living out time-honored traditions. Once over that particularly tough portage with canoes and all our gear we glow in the satisfaction of purposeful work well done as a group. We read from P.G. Downes’s *Sleeping Island* (1943) as a source of inspiration before we head out on the portage (pp. 136-38). If the portage is the trip’s longest or farthest or crosses a height of land, extra (really the only) rations of rum (a thimble full) are given out once the portage is finished with an acknowledgement that the crossing is a “watershed” moment. This setting of inspiration using the journals of a previous explorer and the reward at the end (the extra rations of rum draw on the practice of the Canadian voyageur heritage) are part of a long tradition. Why not make the tradition specific? Call it “great Canadian tradition number 268.” Help make students feel the extra satisfaction, as if finishing the long portage was not enough, of being connected through time to historical precursors. The rum rations involve a ceremony that refers back to the Downes reading. It is a special moment in time and through time.

Later we will draw warmth from our campfire and read how Peter Browning, in *The Last Wil-*

*derness* (1989), felt when experiencing this sensation (p. 26). His words about the primal security of fire may bring articulation to one's thoughts or may expand one's understanding and lead to a reflection on such differences as the warmth of a group by the fire compared with the hearth or the warmth and related dynamic of one's central-air-heating back home. Browning's campfire passage may connect to a thousand fires at this spot or throughout the North. I might tell the story of arriving at the end of a remote Labrador portage and wondering if a friend left the neatly stacked firewood about ten years earlier – a fair question in that remote corner of Canada. "It looked like his style," I might say – and, yes, there is a style to enacting this story of travel through time such that past travelers inform the present with the ways (great Canadian traditions) of the North Woods. We, fellow travel guides and I, prepare travel-literature readings for the first campfire, for starting out, for the last portage of the trip, for canoe sailing, for exploring not only body versus mechanical time but also ways of being with time on the trail, for meeting spirits of the land, and for visiting native pictographs (rock art) sites. It is a healthy list.

We pepper the trail with readings and stories. Stories include those about explorers who, not having the benefit of maps, climbed hills from the lake shoreline to see the next day's passage through the maze of bays and islands; those from the Cree and Anishinaabe about going wendigo, in the winter woods and of becoming a cannibalistic monster; and those about loggers and trappers. One favorite story concerns Peter Freuchen (1955, p. 407) becoming encased in snow after rolling his winter sled as shelter against a storm in the open Arctic barrens. His mistake was leaving his knife outside the sled. His solution, once encased, was to fashion a dagger out of his frozen excrement for digging (by the by, this didn't work). In the end he sacrificed a few fingers.

We pepper the trail with ceremony and ritual throughout the trail: leaving an offering at a pictograph rock art site, sharing a reading about a pictograph from Louise Erdrich's *Books and Island in Ojibwe Country* (2003, p. 16), taking a

break from paddling on the water and having a pipe break (we use licorice pipes), holding story circles around the campfire. The point here is that history is seamlessly woven into the fabric of the travel experience. It is never forced and is mostly shared with the moment of activity: students learn about the First Nations' presence on the land and about exploration history and pioneering trapping, logging, and farming efforts. These are not comprehensive lessons taught on the trail but romantic insights. Detail can follow students to the classroom or into later life. My hope is that students will follow up on a story (or two) told on the trail, drawing lessons from the story broader than those they initially garnered and making generalizations to life themes. If they can accomplish this, Alfred North Whitehead's rhythms of education are neatly followed (1962, pp. 17-21). As educator and travel guide, I may or may not see all these stages of romance, precision, and generalization through to completion. With such experiential learning, the educator cannot be accountable for all that is learned. Wayne Franklin (1979) notes that early American writers:

*Often turned to writing with an urgency, which suggests that it was a means of self-understanding, an essential way of shaping their lives after the facts. They seem too, to have been painfully aware of the many problems which language proposed for people separated as they were from their own world (p. 2).*

Students are required to keep a trip journal. Staff members keep one too. Reflective, factual – it can take whatever shape they like. This work is not graded for quality or quantity. The act of turning to writing is meant to again connect with "great Canadian tradition number 141" and to allow the writer, in the process, to become aware of the problems that language poses in recording the newness of life experiences. Here are two different studded journal excerpts:

*So yeah, I am commando in my New Balance navy shorts that did not see the light today (seeing how we're camping in friggin'*

*Antarctica), and my Nike wind pants that are not only navy and light blue, but also carry that “never been washed” (seriously in the last week) permanent dirt from top to bottom... now seeing as I have been away from camp now for about, heck, who knows, I’m telling time by the flippin’ sun for goodness sakes! – Carly*

*True beauty, true happiness and true comfort for me is feeling like I can live in the moment, breath fresh air, see nature’s beautiful gifts of animals, plants, trees, rock waterfalls and feel my body alive as part of something greater. I know I can’t stay here forever but I want to take with me this feeling of being alive. Truly knowing that my body is strong and healthy, and is not just something to feed, dress up in a way that others will find attractive and trendy, and to complain about. I feel a connection to myself (my soul) out here that I have honestly never felt before... Although I have yet to look in a mirror I am wearing a new glow, sparked by this fresh connection with the earth, nature, living things and people that polluted, rushed, obnoxious city living had all but taken over. Knowing now that true beauty is not the renovated face of “The Swan’s” winner, but the way a tree stands for hundreds of years and wears its scars with pride. For me true beauty is in the way nature has so many treasures that are so fleeting they compel everyone to stop and stare. – Jess*

For many students, like David Thompson of the Canadian North-west or Henry David Thoreau in his *Maine Woods* (1972), there is an urgency to their writing, not for grades but for self-expression as a means of heightened self-understanding. But failing this urgency, it is hoped, all students capture that imaginative spark of feeling part of the long tradition of the field of travel writing. My fellow educator, Wingfield (2003, p. 192) captures the imaginative spark poetically: “Through their writing, students jump into a conversation that began in the fifteenth century. They can’t simply eavesdrop from the margins.”

## Back in the Classroom

Back in the classroom, students of the summer travel course read the Canadian novel *Halfway Man* by Wayland Drew (1989). The book is a natural extension to the canoe trip. Set in the Canadian Shield, the plot involves a native community’s struggles to preserve its setting from a planned tourist resort. They turn the tides of “progress” and in the end have the development plan revoked by kidnapping the resort plan’s leader. Once kidnapped the Native community leader and industrialist are flown north and dropped without maps on a river with the simple plan to paddle back over a few weeks. The gentle environment of the Canadian Shield works its magic as it did for many on our school trip. *Halfway Man* (Drew, 1989) serves to broaden the canoe-trip experience of being on the land with questions such as, what is our relationship of self and culture(s) with the land and is there an innate spiritual impulse for the larger reality of wild places? For many students, some in a science-dominated program, *Halfway Man* (Drew, 1989) is their first read of a novel in over two years of university schooling.

Another assignment involves a book-club gathering. After the canoe trip, students in their travel groups get together to share the themes and story of some Canadian classic canoe- or conservation based literature. They each read a different book. Brief individual reports, oral and written are shared. The written report and minutes of the book-club meetings are handed in. The assignment handout reminds students that school need not be somber and encourages the meeting to be planned for a coffee shop but not a favorite watering hole. Book club encourages a party with literature: getting the tripping group together one more time with learning objectives to sample from a rich heritage of travel and conservation literature. This is a quick and friendly experiential way to introduce all to the likes of Grey Owl (the native imposter of the 1930’s who wrote eloquent travel and conservation prose), Sigurd Olson (a contemplative writer of the North Woods), and classics such as Mina Hubbard’s *A Woman’s Way through Unknown Lab-*

*rador* (1981), and R. M. Patterson's *Dangerous River*. A list to encourage student selections is provided. The following is one book club group's telling feedback about this posttrip class assignment.

*We were talking about how it was weird that for this book club we all read different books, because in most book clubs everyone reads one and comes prepared for a thorough discussion... at first we were saying how this way might be better, but then thought about it, and realized that it's actually kind of cool that we all read different books because for Halfway Man we all read the same book and discussed it, and this switched it up a bit. Initially almost all of us thought that the assignment was kind of dumb, and just something that was taking up more of our time because we were already so busy with our group and individual projects, let alone other classes... but there was a huge turn around by the end of the meeting because... not only did we learn a lot and were motivated to read other books, but we laughed A LOT and had a lot of fun (The Chickadee Group, 2004).*

For a group assignment, in groupings of four to six, students might turn to literature of the Voyager or to First Nations legends or, more specifically, star-constellation stories and identification. Groups are always encouraged to take on one or more epic Canadian travel stories with the challenge to tell and present this back to the class experientially. Two course highlights include the writing and performing of a one-act play that puts the two surviving members of Leonidas Hubbard's 1903 Labrador expedition on trial for the death by fatigue and starvation of their leader in the bush. The two struggled but return from the aborted mission. Dillon Wallace's (one of the two survivors) book *Lure of Labrador* and the secondary source *Great Heart: The History of a Labrador Adventure* by J. W. Davidson and J. Ruge (1988) compose the main literature used to introduce a fictional but very plausible addition to the story. This fictional play manages to involve the class audience as jurors and, more

importantly, tells the story and introduces the literature of the area at the time in a provocative way. A performance of the play was later given at the Toronto Wilderness Canoe Association Symposium to an audience of eight hundred. Now that's some jury.

Another epic story, well told in George Whalley's *The Legend of John Hornby* (1977), had students with construction paper re-create a 1920's cabin on the edge of the treeline on the Thelon River in order to report the final days of three northern adventurers in a winter season when the life-giving caribou migration passed them by. It was magic to see the ingenuity with which the presenters re-created the cabin both physically and in terms of mood in a sterile classroom one afternoon. To set the mood, they used excerpts from Edgar Christian's journal (1980). He was the last to die, only 18 years of age, still idealizing his Uncle Jack. His journal was found in the metal firebox that was well preserved from the elements. To be succinct, these particularly ambitious and memorable presentations made northern literature and history come live as a felt experience.

Individual assignments following the trip can involve studying literature experientially. In the past, students have, using our "on the trail" reading kits as a model, compiled their own travel-reading kits with passages and quotations of their own, choosing to pepper the trail with heritage literature. One favorite topic is the student interest in a follow-up trip as the next challenge. Solo travel and fishing trips are most common. Once the technique issues are addressed they must delve into the literature related to this interest. For the solo trip I recommend Robert Perkins's *Against Straight Lines* and Kamil Pecher's *Lonely Voyage*. These are interesting because Perkins advocates solo travel while Pecher does not. For the fisher's interest, they might see *A River Runs Through It* by Normal Maclean (1992), but I strongly recommend *The River Why* by David James Duncan (1983).

A personal favorite over the years was the student who imaginatively took the journal writings and overall personality of the explorer-surveyor

David Thompson and placed him on a surveying mission over our class canoe-trip route. This is a compelling way of coming to know this explorer, his literature, and his time of travel. It was a fine short story in keeping with Brian Fawcett's *The Secret Journal of Alexander Mackenzie* (1985). Fawcett's work is historical fiction and tells of the finding of the long lost private and secret journals of this explorer. Once the student had the semblance of her idea, she read Fawcett's *Secret Journal* to help ease her into historical fiction.

Many students are surprised to learn there is a literary genre associated with their specific group or individual project interests. Given the variety of group and individual assignments and of readings on the trail, students can be exposed to a rich array of literature, for the most part completely new to them, that they feel connected to experientially. Also, surprisingly, travel literature, a genre most compelling to students, is generally poorly represented at the university level.

### The Winter Northern Storytellers Assignment

*After my story I was like "why did I forget that?" but I soon realized that it didn't matter because it was my story and the important thing was not getting all the information in – but capturing the audience in a fun way. Although I did slip out of character – I think because of nervousness – I was able to make the story fun and I hope they never forget it! Things to work on: staying in character, maintaining the accent, not going too fast, not worrying on getting hung up on parts you've missed. Telling this story will be something that I think [ I ] will remember forever. It just was so much fun and felt so good. I think it is because the story meant so much to me and I was able to relate it to my heritage. Storytelling can be an extremely powerful device!! Cheers to that. – Lydia (reflecting on a telling of the French Canadian legend La Chasse Galerie)*

The summer travel course for up to forty students is the prerequisite for the winter travel course. We travel by snowshoes, hand hauling

winter sleds. WE camp with a variety of cold and warm camping techniques: sleeping in snow shelters (*quinzees*), sleeping in open lean-tos, and sleeping in canvas wall-tents heated by a portable wood stove. There is a course reading kit that explores the themes of place, story, and technology in preparation of the six-day winter camp, which has some time in a rustic cabin and camping. Readings include Robert Service and Jack London.

Students also read the 1930's northern traveler Elliott Merrick's *True North* (1933-1989), a *snowshoe* traveler's bible for the how-tos and the why and what's of living in a more primal way in the Canadian North with northern peoples. We hope to connect their upcoming winter trip experience to the importance of place, story, and technology in education as well as to Canadian winter's ways of living through the themes of travel-heritage literature. A working premise for this outdoor-education course is that we are a northern people who enact a semi-Nordic way of dwelling largely in denial of our winter season. What would the liberation feel like to learn to embrace our "Nordicity"? A winter, experienced well, is a good time to bring this inquiry centrally to our lives through literature, song, travel, and stories.

On the trail more stories and readings are introduced by staff members but now the students, in the main, take over. Each student is to prepare a "northern story" – usually a winter tale for sharing on the trail. These stories will dominate our evening campfires, and some are told during walking breaks on the trail. Students are not giving presentations. They are "storytellers." They do not use notes or overheads or *PowerPoint*. It is often an exposing, raw experience. Many students tell me that this assignment is the most difficult yet rewarding experience in their four years at university. For some it is just too difficult. Then they rely on cue cards or share a listing of story facts. For some it is a natural way to go. For all, it attracts attention by its difference. The storytelling should be ten or fifteen minutes followed by questions. Examples of stories and books told include the Franklin expeditions in the Arctic; the boreal-forest windigo legend or psychosis;

*Elle*, a novel by Douglas Glover (2003); accounts of Marguerite de Roberval's exile on Quebec's lower north shore; *The Beothuk Saga* (Assiniwi & Grady, 2000) concerning this Native group's extinction story from Newfoundland, by Bernard Assiniwi' *Isobel Gunn*, by Audrey Thomas (1999), concerning an Orkney-islander woman posing as a male in the fur trade; the Klondike gold-rush story; and the life story of the early trader and settler George Nelson (2002).

Again, a wide array of northern travel literature and classic northern legends is shared that has over time become part of the well-informed northern winter travelers' psyche connected imaginatively to the season and the land. For the greenhorn, it can be the same, but certainly there is a memorable exposure to a Northern Canadian Literature.

Once back from the winter trail, students' practice story notes are organized in a written form so that others, especially classmates who have heard the personal telling, can have a guide for retelling the story another time. The story notes are compiled into a booklet – a collection of our “On the Trail Winter Stories” – for distribution to the class and any course guests. In this way each year we produce our own anthology of northern stories organized in a storytelling-friendly format. We are all proud of our work with winter travel literature. As the teacher and guide, I tell a story too.

The business of self-propelled travel dominates our time in the North Woods of Canada, summer and winter. The trail, however, is peppered with formal and informal readings and with stories told from this literature of travel, legends, and reflections of the North. This pedagogical place based component to our travels (and classroom time) is “the pleasantest of all diversions,” allowing the mind to be active and to wander back in time with the companionship of another traveler; to render the past as a felt experience, I heard it said. The goal is an imaginative heritage-extended personality we can learn to cultivate. Once students are back in the classroom, assignments and required reading advance this

objective connected experientially with the trail. It is a simple, rewarding task for those who love their subject (outdoor education and travel literature) and who love working experientially with people.

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