Nanaimo Poetry Map

A PLACE-BASED PROJECT BY CEDAR COMMUNITY SECONDARY SCHOOL
SUPPORTED BY SET-BC
Our Premise

The City of Nanaimo maintains a location-based Poetry resource called the Nanaimo Poetry Map. For this project, we travelled to different locations in our community that have a poem written for them and read the poems at these places to try to fully experience them. Students then practiced writing a poem inspired by this same location, then choose a special place of their own. For their chosen location, students were responsible for creating an image and a poem which represent the location. This project was completed by most of our grade eight to eleven students this year, and as such had a variety of criteria and assessments that were grade-appropriate.

SET-BC provided our school with two GoPro cameras and eight Microsoft Surface tablets to utilize for the project. The cameras were used to collect images, both stills and video, and the tablets were to be utilized by students to create final compositions of their poems with the appropriate image.
Our Process

As is typical for a poetry unit, we initiated the project by learning about different types of poetry and reading and responding to selected poems in class. After students had some base knowledge, we went on a series of field trips to read Nanaimo Poetry Map poems in the locations they were inspired by. We did field trips to Living Forest Campground, Jack Point Park, Neck Point Park, and Colliery Dam with different groups of students. Students read and responded to the poems on the trip and then wrote their own. Later, they were responsible for creating a poem for another location of their choice. As with any writing, revising and receiving feedback was crucial for success!

Teachers focused on giving students skills to both write and read poetry effectively at the beginning of the unit, and on effectively moving through the writing process in the later stages. Final presentations required students to present their poem with an image of their creation, which they were to compile on the Surface tablets.

One of the unique things about this project was bringing different classes and grades together for the same task and goal. We had one field trip that featured grade 8-11 students all hiking, reading and learning together. Having many students and many teachers involved made for a different and exciting experience for all of our learners. Also, spreading out the field trips for different classes meant that we were able to refine the process throughout the school year and improve the experience for some of the later groups.
Our Problems (and solutions!)

Though it is quite common to struggle with student engagement during a poetry unit, we found that the connection to our local area was a way to keep our students focused on and interested in the material. Still, there were issues we struggled with. Because the project included so many of our students, it was difficult to leverage the technology we were provided in the most effective way. Eight tablets is not a lot for hundreds of students! That said, this can be worked around by allowing students access to the technology, for a limited time, once they have completed certain benchmark tasks. Even so, however, the ability to work through a task and revise their work as much as we would have like was hampered a bit. Next time, it would make sense for us to spread out the project over the school year even more, so as to spread out the demand for tech access.

Another issue we faced was with weather! Though it’s obviously hard to control, planning the field trips for September, May and June would have likely alleviated some of the student complaints and improved the overall experience. One field trip was brutally cold and on another the fog was so thick that it prevented us from fully taking in the environment.

We also struggled to get students to take the production of an image seriously. Though many of the poems were written to a high standard, we should have taken more time to explicitly teach about image composition and how it can add to the work. Obviously some of the images were great, but we would have loved to see it done to a higher level and should have given students more skills to accomplish this.
Our Pride

The big success of the project was the poems! One of the great things about poetry is that allows student who have less developed English skills a chance to express themselves, and this was no exception. Many of our students were able to compose strong poems which featured a very real connection to a place.

We were also happy with the way students engaged with the field trips at each location. Though we faced some adversity, they were able to see how the land inspired the original poem and were excited to make connections to a location of their own choosing.
One of our issues was that we didn’t see some of the potential of this project until after we had finished. Particularly, we see it now as a great way to incorporate student self-assessment of Core Competencies into our practice. If we were to tackle this project again, we would focus on how they are using multiple forms of Communication and how writing effective poetry and creating interesting images both require Critical and Creative Thinking. Naming these Competencies and practicing them would be a great way to lead into some self-assessment.

We also would have liked to create our own Cedar Student’s Poetry Map; sharing their work with each other, and our school community, could have been done on a large mural in the school and, we think, this would have been a powerful way to publish student work. Likewise, it could have been done online. Because there were classes doing this trip at different times, it might have been neat to see our map grow throughout the year as well.

Finally, like the GeoTour project, we wish we had put the energy into creating a video of the whole process. Perhaps next year we will have student videographers working throughout the school, like yearbook photographers!