

Indigenous Perspectives Introduction

Popular narratives of Canadian history have most frequently been told from the perspective of European settlers. As a result, Indigenous experiences have often been neglected or excluded from the telling of our country's history. For a more comprehensive understanding of Canada's history, it is important to examine it from Indigenous perspectives. Doing so requires students to explore the depth, breadth, diversity, and regional variation of experiences of Indigenous peoples in the land that is now Canada. It is also necessary to examine the legacy and consequences of colonialism and the repressive policies to which Indigenous peoples have been subjected. The aim is to engage students in thinking critically about our historical narratives and help them consider how both individual and collective worldviews shape — and are shaped by — history.

Much of the history of Indigenous peoples in Canada in the last two centuries is characterized by institutionalized discrimination and inequity, through colonialist and assimilationist efforts such as the Indian Act and Residential Schools. However, Indigenous peoples have not been passive over this time. To the contrary, they have been active agents — acting independently and collectively to resist colonial restrictions, to preserve their traditions, languages and beliefs, and to advocate for their established but often-ignored rights.

“There is a world of difference between being an Indian and being Anishinabe. An Indian is a creation of the European imagination and is legally inscribed on us by the federal government. There were no Indians in our territories prior to European arrival. In fact, there are only Indians in contemporary terms if the federal government is allowed to take control of Indigenous identities.”

— John Borrows,
Canada's Indigenous Constitution (2010)

Since European contact, Indigenous peoples have not always been identified by terms of their own choosing. Sometimes that terminology has been derogatory and racist, and the language used reflects a colonialist point of view. This labelling of Indigenous peoples has left an indelible mark on Canadian history. Being receptive to Indigenous peoples' preferred terminology is essential to the process of reconciliation.

First Nations peoples in Canada were initially called “Indians” by colonial Europeans. “Indian” is no longer used as a term to describe Indigenous peoples, though it still serves as a legal definition. “Aboriginal,” meanwhile, is an umbrella term that includes status and non-status First Nations, as well as Métis and Inuit. “Aboriginal” and “Indigenous” are often used interchangeably, but as the current preferred term is Indigenous.

Terminology:

Ceded Territory: Lands granted to a party in a treaty. Lands were often ceded as a result of military or political pressure; lands ceded in treaties were the principal means that Europeans used to acquire control over territory. In Canada, Indigenous peoples and Europeans often had different understandings of land ownership included in treaties.

Unceded Territory: Lands originally belonging to the First People(s) that have not been surrendered or acquired by the Crown. Often refers to lands that are not formally under a treaty; however, there are regions under treaty in Atlantic Canada that encompass lands that have not been surrendered.

Colonialism: A system or policy of dominance and control by one power over an area or people that often includes the exploitation of resources for the explicit purpose of benefitting the colonizing country.

Colonization: The process of settling or appropriating a place and establishing a central system of power over the land and original inhabitants of the area.

First Contact: The first time an Indigenous group makes a connection with Europeans. Can refer to face-to-face interaction, or to “contact” made through objects, ideas, or disease.

Time Immemorial: A period of the distant past that is not defined by historical dates.

Online Resources:

The Canadian Encyclopedia thecanadianencyclopedia.ca

Historica Canada Education Portal education.historicacanada.ca

Indigenous Arts & Stories Teachers’ Kit education.historicacanada.ca/en/tools/432

Truth and Reconciliation Commission Reports nctr.ca/reports.php

Activity 1:

Indigenous Geographies

Essential Question: Who were the first peoples and how did they structure their world?

North America can be loosely divided into areas that share certain geographical characteristics. Each is inhabited by diverse groups of Indigenous peoples. Within the six such areas in Canada (Arctic, Subarctic, Northwest Coast, Plains, Plateau, Eastern Woodlands), different groups sometimes share relationships to the landscape, as shown in shared means of subsistence, stories, social organization, and artwork. However, geographical divisions are rarely precise, and are not representative of Indigenous nations.

Investigate the pre-contact history of a specific Indigenous group in your home region or province/territory, or elsewhere in Canada.

- Begin by reading one of the following regional articles on The Canadian Encyclopedia:
 - » **Arctic Indigenous Peoples in Canada**
 - » **Eastern Woodlands Indigenous Peoples in Canada**
 - » **Northwest Coast Indigenous Peoples in Canada**
 - » **Plains Indigenous Peoples in Canada**
 - » **Plateau Indigenous Peoples in Canada**
 - » **Subarctic Indigenous Peoples in Canada**
- Choose one Indigenous group from within your selected region to research further, using The Canadian Encyclopedia as a starting point.
- Record your research notes in the **Whose Land Is This? Worksheet**.
- As a class, discuss how geographies can influence cultures and societies.

