

Blanket Exercise: Expanded Script

What you Need

- 6 (or more) Blankets
- Statistics written on strips of paper
- Scrolls (written on pieces of paper, rolled as scrolls and numbered on the outside)
- Index cards
- Flip chart and markers
- Photocopies of photographs of resistance
- Seeds
- Symbols of the 4 elements of earth, air, water, fire (optional)
- 1 volunteer (at least)

Step 1

Lay the blankets on the floor up against each other so as to create a large square (there should be enough room on the blankets for all participants to move about freely). Fold one blanket and set it aside.

Invite everyone to stand on the blanket and ask them to move around ON the blankets.

Narration

Narrator: These blankets represent the northern part of Turtle Island, or North America, before the arrival of Europeans. You represent the Aboriginal peoples, the original inhabitants.

Long before the arrival of Europeans, Turtle Island was home to millions of people, living in thousands of distinct societies.

These were fishing, hunting, and farming societies, each with its own distinct institutions, its own language, its own culture and traditions, its own customary laws and systems of governance. These Nations interacted and cooperated with one another -- economically and militarily. Before the newcomers arrived, the original peoples were already well versed in a process of resolving disputes as they arose, through treaty-making.

Diverse as they were, First Peoples shared things in common. Their relationship to the Land defined who they were as peoples. All of their needs – food, clothing, shelter, culture, and spiritual fulfillment – all of these things came from the land, from the blankets. And in response, First Peoples took seriously their collective responsibility to serve the land -- not as its owners, but as its original caretakers.

Step 2

Introduce the volunteer as a representative of the European settlers, and have her/him join the others on the blankets

Narrator: In Europe at the end of the 15th century, events occurred that would deeply impact these Aboriginal societies. In 1493, at the request of the King and Queen of Spain, Pope Alexander issued the following papal bull.

European (opens scroll No. 1 and declares aloud): According to the Doctrine of Discovery in 1493, non-Christian nations may no longer own land in the face of claims made by the Christian sovereigns. The Indigenous people of these lands are then to be placed under the tutelage and guardianship of those Christian nations that ‘discover’ their lands.

Narrator: And so began the process of the European ‘discovery’ and colonization of Turtle Island.

The European(s) step(s) on blankets and begin to mill around.

Narrator: When Europeans first began to arrive to Turtle Island, the relationship between settlers and Aboriginal peoples were characterized by cooperation and interdependence.

Early settlers were greatly outnumbered by Aboriginal peoples. They depended on Aboriginal Peoples for their survival, and to make sense of the complex political and social systems that existed at that time.

There were commercial arrangements and intermarriages, leading to the creation of the Métis Nation, and there were military alliances. These early relationships were formalized in the form of treaties.

The European is milling about, shaking hands, and handing cards to about half of the participants. (Note: If possible, at least 12 participants should NOT receive cards).

Narrator: These treaties were *international* agreements between European crowns and Aboriginal nations, and they formally recognized each nations’s sovereignty and independence. Inherent to treaty-making is the recognition that the First Peoples had been there first, that their territories belonged to them, and that they were self-governing peoples.

European (unrolls scroll and reads): The Royal Proclamation of 1763 hereby confirms that Aboriginal nations have title to their lands, and that consensual treaty-making with the crown is the *only* way that land can be ceded from Aboriginal peoples.

Narrator: Later on, the federal government replaced the crown as the treaty-making body. To the original inhabitants of this part of Turtle Island, treaties were sacred agreements. They marked these agreements with spiritual ceremonies – with the creation of Wampum belts in the

East, and with Pipe ceremonies in the West.

To First Peoples, these treaties were definitely not statements of submission or surrender – they were not real estate deals. Instead, they were statements of peace, friendship, sharing or alliance. They were based upon instructions of traditional spirituality around sharing, respect and honesty. Treaties were means of sharing land and resources, and ensuring peaceful co-existence among diverse peoples.

At some point, the European begins to slowly fold the blankets over, making the blanket space smaller and smaller. The participants are reminded that they must not step off the blankets. The objective is to stay on the blankets, even though the space is decreasing.

Narrator: But the Europeans had altogether different views of land, and of treaties. Land, in their view, was a commodity that could be bought and sold, and treaties were a central means of getting Aboriginal peoples to ‘surrender’ or ‘extinguish’ their title to the land.

Over time, the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and Europeans continued to degenerate. After the war of 1812, Europeans no longer needed First Peoples as military allies; as the fur trade began to dry up and as colonists turned more and more to agriculture, they no longer needed First Peoples as trading partners either.

More and more Europeans arrived, and they quickly outnumbered the Aboriginal peoples. Europeans also brought with them new diseases – small pox, measles, TB – diseases for which the original peoples had no immunity. Fully half of the Aboriginal people alive at that time died from these diseases

Narrator asks those participants with index cards to step off the blanket, as they represent those who died of the various diseases.

Narrator: More and more Europeans also meant an ever increasing demand for new land for settlement. Fuelled by new ideas from Europe about the inferiority of non-white races, colonists began to view First Peoples no longer as allies, but as obstacles to further expansion and settlement – as a ‘problem’ to be solved.

So they began to devise more and more ways to take land from the Aboriginal peoples. Some of the land was taken in war. Some land was stolen outright by the government, which used laws that it had written to enable it to do just that. Some land was taken by killing the Aboriginal peoples.

Step 3

European #2 continues to turn up the blankets into smaller and smaller bundles.

Narrator: With the European drive to control more and more land, Aboriginal peoples' suffering increased.

While narrator gets another blanket (not one that has been on the floor), European #1 walks to one person in the east

European #1: You represent the Beothuk, the original inhabitants of what is now Newfoundland. Your people were hunted down and killed and are now extinct. Please step off the blankets.

Narrator gives European #2 the extra blanket. European #2 then gives the blanket to a participant in the west.

European #2: On the west coast and the prairies blankets infested with the small pox virus were given to Aboriginal peoples. You represent the thousands of Aboriginal people who died from small pox in this way. Please step off the blankets.

Narrator and European #1 walk to the north side of the blankets, and choose one 'island' of people.

Narrator: In the High Arctic, Inuit communities were removed from their traditional territories and relocated to isolated, barren lands with which they were unfamiliar, with often devastating results.

European #1: You represent those First Peoples – the Inuit, and the Innu at Davis Inlet, and countless other Aboriginal communities – who suffered and sometime died through forced relocation.

European #2 directs the group to leave their blanket and move to the smaller, folded blankets.

European #1 get scrolls, hands them out in order to participants.

Narrator: And policies were continually being developed that led to more suffering...

At this point, European #1 and Narrator approach participants in turn, presenting each with a scroll, and asking her/him to unroll the scroll and read it aloud.

Scroll #1: Terra Nullius – The Doctrine of Terra Nnullius, which in Latin means 'empty land' – gave a colonial nation the right to absorb any barren or uninhabitable territory encountered by explorers.

Narrator: In other words, if the land was deemed ‘empty,’ then it considered subject to the Doctrine of Discovery and could be claimed by the European explorers. Over time, this concept was conveniently expanded to include lands not occupied by ‘civilized’ peoples, or those not being put to ‘civilized’ use.

Scroll #2: The BNA (British North America) Act – The BNA, also known as the Constitution Act of 1867, put “Indians and Lands reserved for Indians” under the unilateral control of the federal government.

Narrator: The BNA was drafted in part to provide policy “teeth” for Sir John A. MacDonald’s announcement that Canada’s goal was “to do away with the tribal system and assimilate the Indian people in all respects with the inhabitants of the Dominion.” The Act specified how Aboriginal peoples were put ‘under the protection’ of the Crown. It provided the legal base for the treaties, and it emphasized the government’s central priorities of “assimilation, enfranchisement, and civilization.”

Scroll #3: Indian Act - All laws respecting Indians were first consolidated into the Indian Act in 1876

European #1 (in a loud voice): Now hear this! According to the Indian Act of 1876 and the British North America Act of 1867, you and all of your territories are now under the direct control of the Canadian Federal government. You will now be placed on reserves. Please fold your blankets in half.

Narrator: The effect of the Indian Act on Aboriginal people was to transform independent Aboriginal nations into physically marginalized and economically impoverished ‘bands,’ and individuals into “wards of the state.” Through the Indian Act, the federal government has denied Aboriginal peoples the basic rights that most Canadians take for granted.

European #1: You may not leave your reserve without a permit. You may not own property. You may not vote. You may not practice your traditional spirituality, or gather to discuss your rights, or practice your traditional forms of government. To do any of these things is to face prosecution and imprisonment (or something equally dramatic...)

Narrator: The Indian Act also had huge implications for the restriction of Aboriginal land rights.

Scroll #4: Raising money to fight for land rights in the courts was illegal.

Scroll #5 Enfranchisement - The federal government had a policy in which it would “grant enfranchisement” to all Aboriginal people who entered professions.

Narrator: That is, the government would ‘reclassify’ Aboriginal people entering the professions as Canadians. Lawyers, of course, were included in this legislation, which effectively prevented land rights cases from reaching the courts during the first half of this century.

Scroll # 6: Aboriginal peoples were denied the vote until 1960.

Narrator: Denying Aboriginal peoples the vote allowed non-Aboriginal minorities in some areas to pass laws that further restricted the lives of Aboriginal peoples. When BC entered confederation in 1871, only 10% of its population was non-Aboriginal, but that minority elected representatives who then passed legislation determining things like who could hunt where and how, who could extract what resources, and so on.

Scroll #7: Spiritual ceremonies, such as the potlatch and the Sundance, were outlawed and driven underground.

Narrator: It's important to note that efforts to undermine Aboriginal traditions and ceremonies was part of a broader project of undermining what defined Aboriginal peoples – their relationship to the land – and eliminating them as obstacles to further development.

Scroll #8: Assimilation – At the turn of the century it was widely assumed by the Dominion government that the "Indian problem" would soon solve itself as aboriginal peoples died off from diseases. The survivors would be absorbed into the larger society. These expectations were stated clearly by Indian Affairs deputy superintendent Duncan Campbell Scott who wrote that his goal was "to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic."

Narrator: The government's policy of forced assimilation policy explains, in part, the extraordinary pressures placed on Aboriginal peoples over the past century to surrender and/or sell their lands and resources. The goal of the government in land rights negotiations has been clearly consistent with this policy: to take as much land and resources from Aboriginal peoples as possible.

Scroll #9: Residential schools –From 1820 until 1970's, the federal government removed Aboriginal children from their communities and placed them in church-run boarding schools, often far from their home communities, where in most cases they were prohibited from speaking their own language. Many children, especially those from distant communities, stayed at the school year round, and these were often the children who suffered most. At one point, at the height of the residential school era, over 50% of Aboriginal children were attending residential schools.

European #1: While some report having positive experiences at schools, many more Aboriginal people suffered from the impoverished conditions at the schools, and from emotional, physical and sexual abuse. Many more experienced losses of family and community connections, and of opportunities to learn their culture and traditions from their elders. Raised in an institution, most lost their parenting skills. Some students died at residential schools; many never returned to their home communities.

Scroll #10 1969 White Paper – This piece of legislation proposed the abolishment of the Indian Act and the complete assimilation of Aboriginal peoples into Euro-Canadian society as the solution to the “Indian problem”.

Narrator: Aboriginal peoples saw this legislation, written at a time when Pierre Trudeau was prime minister and Jean Chretien was Minister of Indian Affairs, as a policy aimed at terminating their Aboriginal rights. They were outraged, and they organized and defeated it. From this movement, the National Indian Brotherhood, now known as the Assembly of First Nations, was born.

Scroll #11 Broken promises – Over the years, 2/3 of land set aside for treaties has been lost or taken, through fraud, mismanagement, intimidation, expropriation for military purposes or to development. And rarely has the government made an attempt to replace this land.

European #1: Meanwhile, we continue to allow large companies to set up shop on Aboriginal territories, generate huge profits from natural resources and often pollute and deplete the land, without regard to treaties or land claims, and without any benefits flowing to Aboriginal peoples.

Narrator: Aboriginal peoples continue to view treaties as sacred agreements between sovereign nations that must be honoured to ensure equitable sharing of resources and peaceful coexistence. But that view of treaties continues to go largely unrecognized within non-Aboriginal society, which views treaties primarily as surrender documents.

You may have heard the old saying by Aboriginal peoples: Non-Aboriginal peoples kept only one promise; they promised to take our land, and they took it.

Scroll #12 Termination (or Extinguishment): When the federal government negotiates with Aboriginal communities that have not ceded their traditional lands, it requires that Aboriginal peoples give up their rights, or title, to the large majority of their traditional territory as a condition of settlement. In return, Aboriginal peoples receive a specified set of rights.

Narrator: Since the BNA Act, it has been the policy of the government of Canada to terminate the rights of Aboriginal peoples. It does this through a process is called ‘extinguishment’. A variety of national and international bodies have raised concerns about ‘extinguishment’, including the UN Human right Committee and the Canadian Human Rights Commission.

At this point, there should be a few people standing on very small areas of blankets.

Step 4

Invite those people who have stepped off the blankets to join those still on the blankets in a brainstorm. Ask participants to talk about what impact this history has had on Aboriginal peoples. You may want to write responses on newsprint.

While the brainstorm is ongoing, the European hands out Social Crisis Statistic strips.

Be aware that participating in such an exercise can have a strong impact on participants, especially Aboriginal people. It is important to allow time for participants to share their insights as well as their emotions.

Step 5

Give one strip of paper with a Social Crisis 'statistic' to some or all of the participants. In the event that some people prefer not to read or are unable to do so, you can lay the statistics to the side on the floor and invite those who would like to read to pick one up. Have each participant read his or her statistic aloud and then place the piece of paper on one of the folded blankets.

[OPTION: As the statistics are read aloud, return the 4 elements to the center of the room, amongst the blanket islands]

When everyone has done this, invite people to turn to the person beside them and share what they observe (5 minutes). Talking in pairs will allow people more opportunity to share their insights and feelings.

Then invite participants to discuss this in a large group. Ask how this related to the experiences of Aboriginal peoples and the importance of land to Aboriginal peoples.

Step 6

After discussing the impact of this loss of land, it is very important to move on to a dimension of hope. You might do so in several ways:

- 1. Lay the photos in the workshop booklet around the four elements. Have an assistant (the European!) hand out a seed to each participant). Explain each photo briefly. Then ask participants to come forward one at a time (if they are willing) to place a seed on the picture that speaks to them and name seeds of hope.*
- 2. Ask participants to name some of the signs of hope. Invite participants to scatter seeds across the blankets as they name seeds of hope.*
- 3. Facilitate the time line in the Leadership Guide, but focus on the ways that Aboriginal peoples have resisted.*
- 4. Invite an Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal participant to sing a song, say a prayer, or read a poem that names signs of hope.*

[OPTION: Close with prayer from Leadership Guide]