

Stories of Life in Canada – Kurelek and more

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Suggested Grade Levels: 4 - 6

Subject Areas: Visual arts, social studies, language arts

Rationale:

The artwork of William Kurelek provides a unique and rich contribution to the Canadian “story”. His paintings and illustrations overflow with information about our prairie and northern landscapes, everyday community life from the early 20th century, and the Ukrainian Canadian experience. These visual stories are especially suited for young learners. This lesson will give students an opportunity to discover the stories to be found in Kurelek’s artwork and to enrich their knowledge of and appreciation for the life on the prairie’s and in Canada’s north. Students will bring these stories to life, using drama, music, and/or creative movement. They will also create visual winter “stories” from their own experience.

Logistics:

Classroom Set-up

- Access for full class viewing of downloaded National Film Board video
- Desks will need to be re-arranged to enable group work.
- Use of the multi-purpose room for developing and presenting dramatic “stories” would be helpful.

Materials

- Paper for storyboarding
- Various costume and props items (optional)
- Drawing paper, ball point pens, coloured pencils

Suggested Resources / Images

- Websites that include images of Kurelek’s work (e.g., Mayberry Fine Art, Loch Gallery in Winnipeg)
- Picture books illustrated by Kurelek, such as *A Prairie Boy’s Winter* or *A Prairie Boy’s Summer*
- National Film Board film entitled *Kurelek* (can be downloaded from Wikipedia)

Suggested Outcomes:

Students will be expected to:

- Discover art as a way of expressing ideas (visual arts)
- Demonstrate an understanding of the lives of artists within cultural / historical / social contexts (visual arts)
- Demonstrate an understanding of the interactions among people, places, and the environment (Social studies)

- Respond personally to a range of texts (Language arts)
- Create texts collaboratively, using drama (Language arts)

Introduction:

To prepare for the lesson, have a class discussion about “a picture is worth a thousand words”. Students might have been asked to bring a favourite picture book that tells a story about people in a particular place, or books borrowed from the library or another classroom library might be used to encourage ideas. Talk together about all the things about people and places that can be learned from looking at a drawing or painting. (You might wish to use one example that everyone can view for this activity.)

Suggestions for Teaching and Learning:

1. As a whole group, view examples of the artwork of William Kurelek. It would be excellent to visit a gallery for this part of the lesson. The permanent collection of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia has wonderful works by Kurelek (e.g., *An Eskimo Dice Game*, *A Greenlandic Woman’s Chore*, *Sky Tossing at Alaskan Whaling Celebration*, *Eskimo Children Playing*). If a visit to a gallery is impractical, on-line images by Kurelek could be viewed as a class. As students view the Kurelek images, encourage discovery through questions such as:
 - What can you learn about the place/setting of the work?
 - About the people?
 - What is happening?
 - When do you think that this is taking place?
 - What tools did the artist use to create the pictures? (e.g., paint, brushes, pencils)
2. Discuss some key points about Kurelek, such as his Ukrainian heritage, his love of the prairies, the fact that he was self-taught, and his huge artistic output. Ask students to consider whether there are other things that can be learned about the artist from the images that they viewed.
3. View together the film *Kurelek* (10 minutes), focusing on how the artist used his drawings to tell rich stories about the life of his family as immigrants to Canada.
4. Invite students to write brief individual responses to the film, pointing out which aspects of the artwork they found most powerful, which aspects of life on the prairies in the early 20th century they found most surprising, most harsh.
5. Organizing students in groups of 4-6, have each group choose one of Kurelek’s illustrations/paintings. You may wish to provide “guidance” with their choices, so that each group has a different work. Explain that each group will create and present a short dramatic piece based on the artwork, extending the “story” found there. Each “play” will have three scenes. Together, discuss criteria for their creative work. These criteria should include the following:
 - Scene 1 must give a glimpse of what might have been happening prior to the scene in the artwork.

- Scene 2 must be a frozen “tableau” that interprets the Kurelek scene.
 - Scene 3 must suggest what might have happened immediately following that scene.
 - Total length of the play should not be more than one minute.
 - Each play should have a title.
 - Dialogue, spoken words, cannot be used.
 - Each scene should communicate an emotion.
 - Planning the play will include developing a storyboard outline of each scene.
 - Each play will be presented to the class.
6. Together, agree upon additional criteria regarding group work, respect for others’ work, etc.
 7. Provide a fixed time frame for the group work. It is suggested that students’ story boarding and planning could involve approximately 30 minutes.
 8. As students plan their dramatic stories in groups, encourage them to first examine their chosen artwork. What is happening? What feelings does the artwork evoke? What might have happened just before this scene? What will happen next? Referring to this discussion, they then develop outlines for their 3 scenes. Once their storyboards have been drafted, remind them to consider any revisions that might enhance their scenes.
 9. Suggest the possibility of using singing (e.g., a children’s game), creative movement (e.g., skating on a pond in sub-zero temperatures), or “found” instruments (vocal sounds, body sounds, objects in classroom) to enhance the scene with sound. These should all be included on their storyboard.
 10. When preparatory work has been completed, ask students to jot down 2 or 3 thoughts about their work (questions, challenges, successes) that they want to return to later.
 11. Once groups have had an opportunity to rehearse their “plays”, have a class presentation by each group. Decide in advance what the “playing space” will be and where the audience will sit. Ask audience members to jot down what is happening in each scene and what its predominant emotion is.
 12. Following the presentations, talk together about the “stories” that were told with minimal use of words. Relate the richness of these stories to the original Kurelek work and to the “picture is worth a thousand words’ discussion that introduced the lesson.

Extension of Ideas:

During a subsequent class period, have students look again at the Kurelek scenes. Explain the technique that he used of outlining figures with ballpoint pen and using coloured pencils to add colour and texture. Invite students to create a visual winter scene / story from their own community, using the same tools as Kurelek used. Once their artwork is completed, have them create a card for their work that includes the title, their own name, and a brief explanation of why they chose this particular scene/story.

Ask students whether their families have recently immigrated to Canada. If so, invite them to share stories of their experiences coming to a new country. Students might also have neighbours who are recent immigrants. What are the challenges for immigrants? What do they bring with them? It could be really special to have recent immigrants visit the class and talk about their homeland, what brought them to Canada, what challenges they have faced, what hopes they have for their future here.

Arrange for students to videotape the dramatic stories. These recordings could be shown on a computer or TV monitor located in the library or school lobby.

Invite students to mount an exhibition centered around storytelling that used no spoken words. They might include their own artwork and that of Kurelek and other artists. Challenge students to find artists in their own communities whose work focuses on telling stories.

Suggestions for Assessment:

Students could reflect individually and as a class about all that they learned. Use prompts such as - What did you learn about life on the prairies in the early 20th century? About William Kurelek? About the experience of being an immigrant? About telling stories without using words? About creating a play that has more than one scene? Journals could be used to record these reflections.

Students could complete self and peer assessment rubrics, based on the given criteria, for their creation and presentation of stories through drama.

Students could write a personal response to a selected Kurelek artwork. What story does it tell? What does it tell about the landscape / environment? What draws the viewer into the story? What other stories do they think of when they look at this work?