

SUPPORTING ABORIGINAL STUDENTS WITH THEIR GRADUATION PORTFOLIO

In 2005 May, a working committee consisting of teachers, a First Nations Student Support Worker and district staff began meeting to consider strategies to ensure Aboriginal student success with the Graduation Portfolio. Although the successful completion of a portfolio is a graduation requirement under the 2004 Graduation Program, committee members approached the task of recommending strategies to support Aboriginal students developing their portfolio by asking two key questions. The first question asked was, "What do we know about Aboriginal students and their learning?" This question led to the committee's second question, "How do we ensure the portfolio process is a meaningful learning experience for Aboriginal students?"

The Graduation Portfolio is a three-year process which presents a number of challenges, but given the time span for development and completion, the portfolio provides an opportunity for students to link and highlight a wide variety of experiences including those from home, the community and school. In many ways, the portfolio allows for a focus on learning experiences in a very broad sense and has the potential to widen school success to include experiences beyond those of the classroom. Aboriginal people encourage and acknowledge the value of all learning experiences and the integration of school experiences with those learning experiences outside of school. The Graduation Portfolio provides students with the opportunity to showcase both in-school and out-of- school experiences while fulfilling the evaluation and assessment requirement of the portfolio.

It is important for teachers acting as advisors/mentors to Aboriginal students developing their portfolios to understand the importance of forming personal learning relationships with students. All students, including Aboriginal students, draw on a wide range of experiences to express themselves. For Aboriginal students, some of these experiences may include systemic barriers reflecting 200 years of colonialism, while others may be very personal, reflecting both traditional and contemporary cultural practices. Many Aboriginal youth may find expressing these experiences and their thoughts about the experiences difficult and will 'shut down' unless they have a certain level of trust in and respect for the person with whom they are communicating. Teacher mentors/advisors should be sensitive to Aboriginal student responses to experiences which may include racism and bullying, and that emotional responses may be expressed in portfolio work.

Cultural expression is an Aboriginal tradition and the Graduation Portfolio offers Aboriginal students an opportunity to tell their story of school, community and home experiences. In this respect, the portfolio is a good 'cultural fit' for Aboriginal students. Teachers working with Aboriginal students should consider strategies to include expressive representations of portfolio assessment criteria and evidence.

Making the Graduation Portfolio experience meaningful for Aboriginal students will greatly enhance the likelihood of success with the three-year portfolio process. Listed below are a number of considerations teachers may find helpful when working with Aboriginal students (as well as non-Aboriginal students) who are developing their Graduation Portfolios.

- Help focus students in their selection of portfolio evidence by highlighting and drawing attention to their successes, particularly those in the home and community.
- Goal setting activities should focus initially on the short-term.
- Plan for a gradual implementation of the portfolio, using course assignments, projects and participation in school activities as possible portfolio evidence.
- Focus on tasks completed rather than tasks to be done.
- Explain portfolio process after students have gathered several pieces of evidence and had it assessed.
- Transfer responsibility for the portfolio to students over time.
- Consider safe keeping issues related to the portfolio.
- Consider modeling a portfolio to help build a personal learning connection to allow for learning through modeling.
- Engage students' parents/guardians in the portfolio process including extended families.
- Remain sensitive to Aboriginal culture and open to learning about it.
- Wherever possible, involve FNSSW and resource teachers to assist students with the portfolio process.
- Consider adding aspects in Portfolio Choice that include Aboriginal perspectives.

The Graduation Portfolio requires students to collect evidence in six areas (Portfolio Organizers):

1. Arts & Design
2. Community Involvement & Responsibility
3. Education and Career Planning
4. Employability Skills
5. Information Technology
6. Personal Health

For each of the six Portfolio Organizers, students are required to gather one or more pieces of 'evidence' as described in each of the various Portfolio Aspects. Using Portfolio Evidence, students respond to the evidence according to specific criteria that form the basis for assessment. Each of the six Portfolio Organizers requires collection and assessment of at least one piece of evidence which is referred to as Portfolio Core. Students have the option of selecting additional evidence for assessment from one or more of the six Portfolio Organizers. This is referred to as Portfolio Choice.

What follows is a list of a number of Aboriginal activities linked to specific Portfolio Aspects. Many of the activities listed are multidimensional and therefore, the various dimensions associated with each of the activities should be considered when matching Portfolio Aspects to activities. It should be noted that the recommendations for Portfolio Evidence based on Aboriginal activities are in addition to what exists for non-Aboriginal youth.

Note: The table below is best understood when used with the Graduation Portfolio Assessment and Focus Areas guide. Print copies of this publication are available in schools and electronically on the Ministry website at: http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/graduation/portfolio/portfolio_guide.htm. Within this guide, page 119, includes a list of Employability Skills that is worth noting.

ABORIGINAL ACTIVITY	ASPECT
Potlatch (ceremony)	1.4, 2.1, 4.4
Pow-wow	(1.1, 1.2 dancing), 1.4, 2.1, 4.4, (6.1 & 6.2 = dancers & musicians), (6.5 = dancers)
Fishing – personal, family & community (includes processing)	2.1, 4.1, 4.2, 4.4, 6.2
Hunting – traditional, personal, family & community	2.1, 4.1, 4.2, 4.4, 6.2
Cedar Bark Stripping & Processing	1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 2.1, 4.1, 4.2, 4.4
Drumming	1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 4.4, 6.1, 6.2
Drum-making	1.1, 1.2
Berrying – traditional, personal, family & community	2.1, 2.2, 4.1, 4.4, 6.3
Carving (including canoes), Jewellery Making, Beadwork, Weaving	1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 2.1, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4 (6.1 & 6.2 = canoe carving)
Sweat-Lodge (fire-keeper & participation), Canoe Journeys	4.1, (4.4, 6.1, 6.2 = canoe journeys only) 6.4, 6.5
Family Night, West Coast Night, Community Dance	1.4, 2.1, 2.2, 2.4, 4.1
Advocacy Events	2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 5.2
Aboriginal Conferences (including career & employment), Workshops for Youth	2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 3.2, 4.1, 4.2
Aboriginal Camps (educational & leadership)	3.2, 5.2, 5.4
Storytelling (theatre/music)	1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 3.3, 5.2
Support for Elders	2.1, 2.2
Canoe Journeys	(2.4), 4.1, (4.2), 4.4, 6.1, 6.2
Canoe Carving	1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 4.4, (6.1, 6.2)
Healing Circles	2.2, 6.4, 6.5

(Note: Aspects 5.1 and 5.2 could apply to many of the above activities).

The above list is meant to be only a start to identifying Aboriginal activities that could be useful to students for gathering evidence to support their Graduation Portfolios. As students begin considering possible sources of evidence for their portfolios, other traditional and contemporary activities may be identified by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. It is recommended that these activities be added to the above table in the spaces provided.

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