



**ATFE**

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**A KINESTHETIC EDUCATIONAL  
PROCESS: THE CONTEXT OF  
OUR LAND**

The Canadian Caucus

# A Kinesthetic Educational Process: The Context of Our Land

Canadian Caucus

The Blanket Exercise

## Step 1

Lay six or more 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.) One blanket is folded and set aside.

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

**Narrator:** These blankets represent the northern part of Turtle Island, or North America, before the arrival of the 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 – to Mother Earth – defined who they were as peoples. All of their needs – for 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 this volunteer join the others on the blanket:

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

**European** (opens a scroll 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.

Now, the European steps on blankets and begins to mill around.

**Narrator:** When Europeans first began to arrive to this part of 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 First 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 Metis (*pronounced "May-tee"*) Nation, and there were military alliances. These early relationships were formalized in the form of treaties.

The **European** (unrolls a scroll and reads): The Royal Proclamation of 1763 hereby confirms that Aboriginal nations have title to their lands and the 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 treat-making body. To the original inhabitants of this part of the 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 as they are sometimes interpreted today – 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 Narrator reminds the participants that they must not step off the blankets. The objective is to stay on the blankets, even though the space is decreasing.*

**Narrator:** But European colonialists 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. The 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 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. The colonists also brought new ideas from Europe about the inferiority of non-white races. Soon colonists began to view First Peoples no longer 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**

*The **European** 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.

*The **European** walks to one person in the east.*

**European:** You represent the Beothuk, (*pronounced “Bay-Awe-Tuk”*) the original inhabitants of what is now Newfoundland. Your people were hunted down and killed and are now extinct. Please step off the blankets.

*The **European** then gives the folded blanket to a participant in the west.*

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

**Narrator and European** walk to the north side of the blankets, and choose one ‘island’ of people (2-3 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:** 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.

*The **European** directs the group to leave their blanket and move to another smaller, folded blanket.*

*The **European** then hands out the numbered scrolls to participants.*

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

**Narrator** asks the participants with the scroll #1 to unroll and read it aloud, followed by scroll #2, and so on.

**Scroll # 1:** Terra Nullius – The notion of Terra Nullius, 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 was 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 – 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** (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 be placed on reservations. Please fold the remaining 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:** You may not leave your reserves 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.

**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 the 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 Sun Dance, 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 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 the 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 languages. 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:** 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 when Pierre Trudeau was Prime Minister and Jean Chretien (who later became Prime Minister of Canada) 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, 2/3rds 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:** 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 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 with 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 British North America Act, it has been the policy of the government of Canada to terminate the rights of Aboriginal peoples. It does this through a process called “extinguishment.” A variety of national and international bodies have raised concerns about “extinguishment” including the United Nations Human Rights Committee and the Canadian Human Rights Commission.

*At this point there should be only about 12 people left standing on very small areas of blanket.*

#### **Step 4**

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