New Web site offers the world traditional insights

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Sweetgrass Writer

CALGARY

A class of Grade 4 Aahsaopi Elementary School Blackfoot Immersion students and Elders from the Kainai Tribe, together with Galileo Educational Network, have created a new online resource about Indigenous plants and traditional knowledge.

The Blackfoot and Elders from the Blood reserve of southern Alberta were at risk of losing precious knowledge, knowledge passed down orally from Elder to child. With the nine- and 10-year-old children using current technology, it is hoped this knowledge will be available to them again, as well as to the people of the world.

Working with the Galileo Educational Network, representatives from the Kainai Board of Education, Red Crow Community College, and University of Calgary, the Nitsitapiisini—Stories and Spaces: Exploring Kainai Plants and Culture Web site was officially launched May 27 at MacEwan Hall at the University of Calgary.

Canadian Culture Online funded this unique Web site, which is presented in English, French and Blackfoot and offers an assortment of Aboriginal stories and video interviews with Elders. This site also includes students’ writing, art, music, 41 digitized books and innovative searching capabilities.

For instance, if someone typed in sweetgrass, it would show every single page that had sweetgrass in every book on the Web site.

“This is groundbreaking work. Even the design of the Web site is very sensitive to Aboriginal ways of knowing,” said Sherri Mackay, educational mentor at Galileo.

Mackay said that one of the most striking designs of this work is the sounds of animals and birds playing in the background as an Elder talks about each plant and its use as the cursor rolls over the page.

“You know where you are in the context of what you can see, but what you can also hear,” said Mackay. “We are trying to emulate how it might be that you might actually learn on the landscape.”

The Web site was finished at the end of March. It is a site that has engaged several techniques from the scientific discipline of ethnobotany. Ethnobotany is defined as the study of the relationship between people and plants.

According to Mackay, learning about plants from a science book and actually creating the knowledge of plants are two ways of learning, but are really quite different, from each other.

“For the children, they are actually creating knowledge and harnessing the knowledge and are bringing it forward to the world, but also to this living discipline of ethnobotany,” said Mackay.

Galileo is a six-year-old, non-profit organization with a mandate to improve student learning: Mackay said they became involved in this project to mentor the teacher in using what they call inquiry-based learning and technologies so that the students were involved in real work that contributes knowledge to disciplines.

“We want to change education and make it a better place for students,” said Mackay.

The youth and Elders have greatly benefited in many ways with regards to the creation of this Web site. The youth were able to hear the stories from the Elders, be on the land with the Elders and to learn about the methods of using plants. As well, they learned about cultural protocols with regards to who has access to this information, how to learn and how to make different medicines. The youth became confident in learning different technologies. They learned how to use digital cameras, camcorders, voice recorders and Web page design software.

At the start of the project, Mackay said, several students wouldn’t even speak out loud, but by the end they were speaking to more than 200 delegates at the University of Calgary.

“The huge benefit for the youth is their confidence level,” said Mackay. “Their public speaking skills and just their overall confidence level have increased dramatically. They really see themselves as storytellers, not just for their own tribe but they understand that the work they were doing was going to inform the rest of the world, therefore, they are very proud of that.”

Only the Kainai Elders could unlock the knowledge of sweetgrass, sage and red tea to the children. Mackay said that the Elders repeatedly expressed their gratefulness to be able to speak with children about their traditional ways of knowing. Almost every Elder spoke about this knowledge and about the potential of it being lost. They also spoke about the generations of boarding schools and how it made it so difficult to share these ways.

“It was very emotional for them to come into a classroom and share these ways of knowing when just generations ago they were told by their teachers not to,” said Mackay.

“It was very empowering for them to be able to tell their stories and reclaim the classroom.”

Carolla Calf Robe, an Elder from the Blood reserve, was a little apprehensive about sharing her knowledge of plants for it to be placed on this Web site for the world to see. Once she sat down with the children, however, she said her mixed emotions began to subside.

“I did this for the children of the Blood reserve and future generations,” said Calf Robe.

This whole experience has been a humbling one for her, she said, but rewarding at the same time. The children’s eagerness to learn about the plants and their uses is what inspired Calf Robe to share her grandmother’s knowledge and teachings of the plants.

“My reward is seeing these children wanting to learn and knowing that they will pass these teachings and knowledge on to the next generation,” Calf Robe said.

For the most part, the storytelling and traditional teachings took place out in the field, while some of the work was done within the classroom. Mackay said that for some Elders it was difficult to be in the classroom. For others they were anxious about walking through the school doors.

“They often spoke about honoring their ancestors with this work, that this work allowed their ancestors to have a voice into the future,” said Mackay.