

Gauntlet News - Cultural heritage preserved online

Website aims at preserving native oral traditions

Story by: [Chris Beauchamp](#), News Editor

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A group of Grade 4 Blackfoot immersion students had a unique chance to learn and pass on the traditions of their people using new technology.

The Stories and Spaces: Exploring Kainai Plants and Culture project had eight Kainai students from the Blood Reserve of Southern Alberta interview their elders and film the traditionally oral teachings for preservation as an online resource. Kainai means blood in the Blackfoot language.

"We learned how to use digital cameras, camcorders, computers and editing software," said Noah Fox, one of the students. "In the future, when our people get sick, they will go on our website. They will know the place to find out how to get better."

The project was spearheaded by Galileo Education Network, a not-for-profit group, in partnership with the University of Calgary, the Kainai Board of Education and Red Crow Community College. The major motivation behind the project was to preserve the traditions and culture of a society threatened by assimilation.

"The legacy of boarding school culture wiped out a lot of this knowledge," noted Sherri Mackay, Education Mentor with the Galileo Education Network. "It was very difficult to find elders who still had this knowledge."

Mackay stressed the positive effect the project had on the children involved.

"One of the major successes was the gains in their self-esteem, public speaking skills, confidence and sense of themselves as successful learners and storytellers," said Mackay, who noted the high esteem awarded to storytellers in native culture. "One could say it's a culture of heroes. Some people on the reserves consider these children in that category."

The site was officially launched Fri., May 27 on the U of C campus as part of the Association for Media and Technology in Education in Canada conference. Over 200 delegates and academics were on hand. Features of the online resource include descriptions and pictures of indigenous plants, video and audio interviews with elders, landscape panoramas and over 40 fully digitized books.

Red Crow College instructor Narcisse Blood stressed the danger of relying exclusively on traditional scholarship without the context of oral tradition.

"I would tell my students that if your identity as a Blood person was dependent on these books, you would be seriously mislead," said Blood. "These are resource books that are useful in the context of also checking it out with the oral traditions. When it's done in that way, it completes the picture a little bit more."

Blood also believes the website can become a tool for shaping future generations of Kainai children in ways nearly lost to current generations.

"One of the disadvantages we have in today's world is we are distant to the land," said Blood. "In Blackfoot, the land is our nurturer. It's not just the plants, it's in elation to the land, to the plants, to the animals, to us, and what they communicate to us. What is being communicated to us that we're not hearing?"

"This project becomes very, very important in that respect," he continued. "What these children are going to be brought up with, maybe they'll receive communication from this place better than we can."

The project was funded with a government grant from the Department of Canadian Heritage's Canadian Culture Online program.

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