

Pro Wrestling at the Heritage Fair

By Tom Morton

Gene Kiniski, self-proclaimed as Canada's greatest athlete, had passed away just weeks before and now I was looking at his portrait and a tribute, but not in the sports section or obituary. He was one of the wrestlers featured in Karamvir's research project on the history of Canadian professional wrestling at Richmond and Delta's 2010 Heritage Fair on April 30, 2010. I was there to give workshops on historical thinking to groups of elementary and secondary students in a program full with choir singing, mask making, story telling, judges' interviews, and compelling student displays.

A huge metal salmon sculpture greets the visitors at the entrance to the Richmond Cultural Centre where the elementary students' displays were held. Some of the students dressed in period costume; others offered food samplings such as bannock; many had proud parents along side. The secondary students' display was next door at a seniors' centre, next to the cribbage boards. Organized in a spirit of fun and celebration by education co-ordinator Emily So, the displays were a magnificent blend of personal interest, creative presentation, and – thankfully for my purpose – historical thinking.

The elementary students' research topics could be grouped into two main categories: the greatest number were on the traditional stories of prominent figures like Laura Secord and John A. Macdonald and, of course, hockey; but there were also a number that reflected multi-cultural themes such as the history of the gurdwara or a family story of immigration. And then there were the unusual such as the history of Tim Horton's and Karamvir's pro wrestling.

The secondary topics were more diverse – from the October Crisis to the link of Lewis Carroll's Mad Hatter to mercury poisoning – and often more local such as the Finn Slough, Delta Manor, the Interurban railway, and the Georgia Cannery. Several of these were in French. (This encouraged several curious francophone seniors to visit and talk with me about growing up francophone in English Canada and the correct gender of “garde-robe.” It's masculine.)

What linked all of the research projects was a rubric created a few years earlier by Gail Semniak that featured two historical thinking concepts, *significance* and *evidence*. These were the basis for the judges' evaluation and from what I overheard, the judges' questions for the students did indeed reflect the rubric. In my workshops I tried to continue these conversations.

The elementary students' reasoning about significance was intriguing. Karamvir, for example, in answer to the question of why the topic was significant had written that “the wrestlers I have chosen do not take drugs or steroids.” Rather than reflect the Benchmarks criteria that were on the rubric, this seemed to reflect one of Ian Dawson's criterion: a really good or a very bad example to other people of how to live or behave. In

addition, Karamvir also wrote, “They are people like us. We are all equal,” which is not quite textbook Benchmarks but, nonetheless, intriguing. Unfortunately, during the workshop the room was noisy and Karamvir was a bit shy, so we could not really explore his ideas.

I introduced the idea that a topic could be significant if it were linked to larger, more meaningful narrative. Some students had clearly done this: Tim Horton’s was part of the story of Canada’s economy and wealth. However, when I asked the group why the beaver, prominent in a display on Canadian symbols, was significant, they were stumped. They were grade 5 students so I knew that they had studied the fur trade and the fair was only a short walk to the Fraser River, but it took many prompts for them to see any connection between their school history and our furry national symbol.

The elementary students had not done nearly as much thinking about the second historical thinking concept on the rubric, evidence; however, the secondary students were very thoughtful about this concept. Most of them had a good sense of the role of secondary and primary sources and challenges in trying to interpret and use them. One boy who had researched Richmond’s “Asian Legacy” wrote that “we wanted to become that person, not just write about them.” One group of three girls had decided to act out the roles of pioneer women at Delta Manor, mostly to enhance their presentation but also to try to have a feel for the people at the time.

We also had good discussions on significance. The Delta Manor girls first said that the Delta Manor community was significant for its chickens, but with a few prompts were able to articulate that their research revealed something about the nature of community in the past that resonated with people today in words that resembled Benchmarks language.

Although I was there to talk about historical thinking, the heritage fair is, of course, about much more. Both organizer Emily So and I thoroughly enjoyed the students’ enthusiasm about their research. As Emily says, “To hear students from Grades 2 on up demonstrate their passion for Canadian history and heritage reminds me why we do this! In particular, their excitement about their topic is usually followed by their pride to be Canadian and share in that history and heritage.” Including Gene Kiniski.