

Incorporating Squamish language and culture in day to day interactions at KGMS

Over the past decade, Kenneth Gordon Maplewood School (KGMS), a private K-12 school on the North shore that serves children with learning disabilities, has worked in collaboration with design students from Emily Carr University of Art + Design (ECU). This year at KGMS, our primary focus was to create opportunities for students to try to learn, write, and speak Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) words in day to day school interactions.

The traditional territory of the Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) Nation is located in the Lower Mainland region of British Columbia. It includes some of the present-day cities of Vancouver, Burnaby, and New Westminster, all of the cities of North Vancouver and West Vancouver, Port Moody, and all of the District of Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and the Municipality of Whistler. KGMS too is situated on the Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) land. The Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish People, villages, and community) have a complex and rich history. Ancient connections can be traced within the Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) language through terms of place names and shared ceremonies. KGMS wanted to explore ways for students to know more about this rich culture and be well versed with the Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) language.

At KGMS, our primary contacts and collaborators for this project were Anjeanette Dawson (Indigenous Specialist) and Marisa Pahl (Art Teacher). From ideation to prototyping, Anjeanette and Marisa were involved in each step throughout the six-month project. Their knowledge about the Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) culture and understanding of the learning abilities of the students at KGMS were immensely helpful in shaping this project. The Health Design Lab team included project leader Zach Camozzi, co-ordinator Andrew Siu and student research assistants Nikoo Farvardin and Alija Sule. The diversity of the HDL and KGMS team promoted a rich intercultural dialogue on the team's first visit to KGMS. While the HDL team learned about Squamish culture from Anjeanette, the folks at KGMS learned a little about Iranian and Indian culture through our international graduate research assistants.

For the HDL team, it was imperative to understand the nuances of the Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) culture and language, and then find appropriate ways to convey this information to the students. This was particularly challenging since there are not many printed resources available on this subject. Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) people pass down information through generations verbally in the form of stories. The HDL team too learned all that they could from their dialogue with Anjeanette. Anjeanette also spoke about the methods that they currently use to teach the children Squamish. Those included putting up posters of Latin words and their Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) translations on school cork boards. There was a special Squamish

corkboard near the school entrance with picture cut-outs of Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) people, the land, sports, and about the culture. While this was a great initiative, we wanted to bring about some changes to this rather western way of learning. We wanted to use an indigenous approach to teach children about the rich indigenous knowledge of the Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) people.

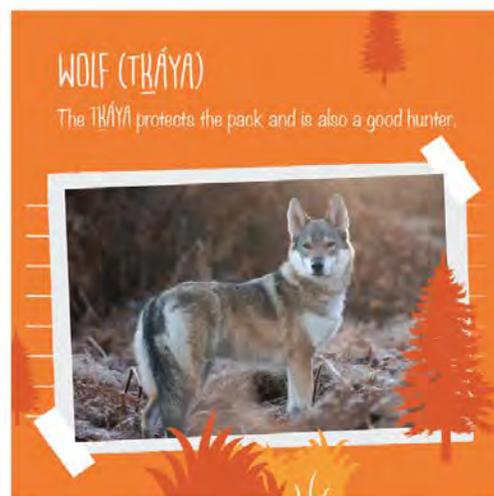
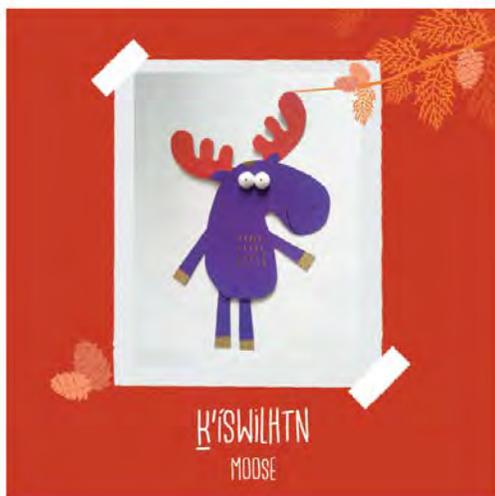
Indigenous way of learning is holistic and reflexive where learners actively engage with their environment. Similarly, we wanted the children to be able to learn the language in an active, engaging, and embodied manner. Our first set of explorations included alphabet stamps that playfully allowed the students to stamp and learn new Squamish words each week. These stamps were coupled with a chatterbox installation that uttered the word in Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish). We set this up at the Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) corkboard. To begin with, the words had to be simple with few characters. It was difficult to find relevant words that fit the above criteria from the Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) dictionary. Finally, we settled on two words: “Nuuw” meaning “Hello” and “Tses” meaning the number “Nine”. Our prototypes were simple and low fidelity to match the other installations in school. We also wanted the prototype to seem approachable. The children created a mess with the stamps indicating that they enjoyed the process. Some even managed to correctly stamp the words.

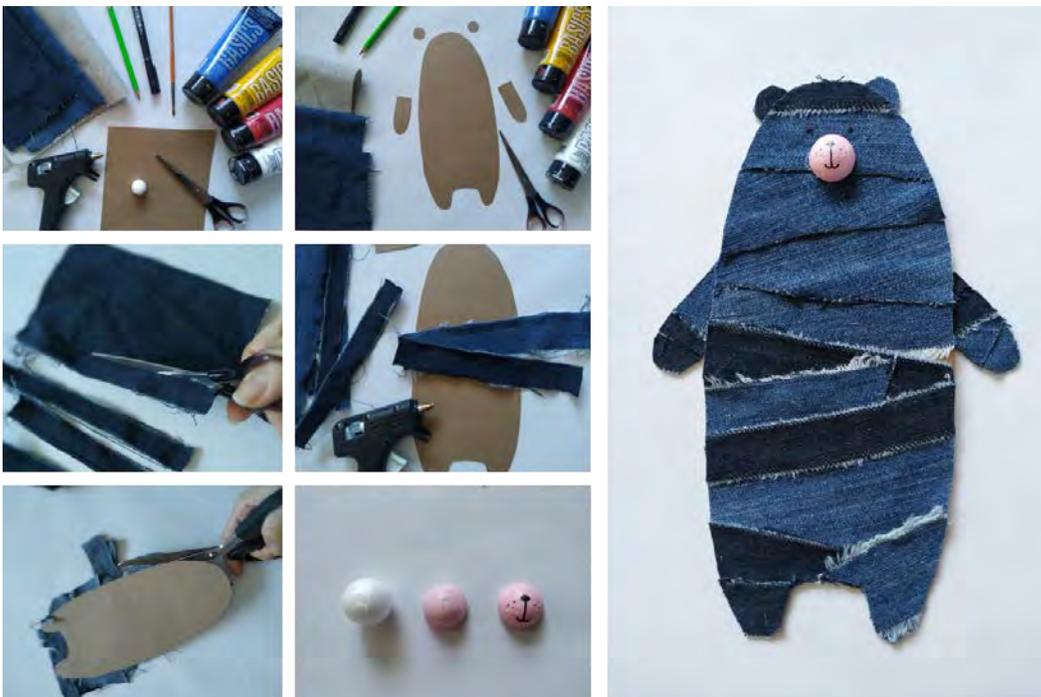
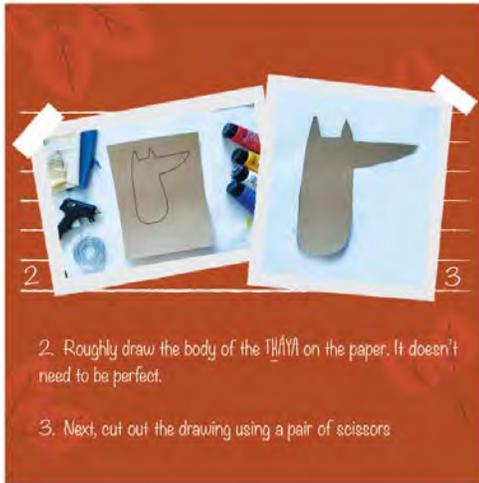


Learning through stories and storytelling is an important aspect of indigenous learning. We also explored the possibility of creating a character to support the chatterbox activity. This character could lead the process of indigenous storytelling in the classroom and encourage students to explore their environment. We wanted the character to be able to emote so that the children can relate to it and empathize with it. After working on a few non-specific prototypes we strongly felt that we should learn more about characters in Squamish stories and possibly develop a character based on one. We are still working towards the development of a final character.



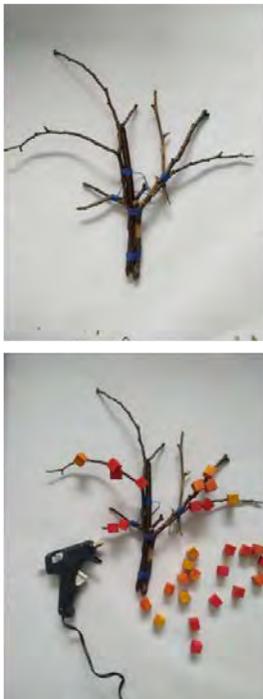
The chatterbox paved way for a Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) animals book, which also focused on the process of learning through making. The book displayed the picture of an animal in the Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) style of illustration followed by a craft activity in which the children can create the animal using basic materials. This activity can be carried out by the students in class individually or within smaller groups. This making can be accompanied by teachers telling a Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) story about the animal. Parents can also carry this out at home with their kids. This could be a great way to engage kids in learning at home especially during times of COVID-19. The animals' book creates a holistic learning experience. It also brings children, teachers, and parents together creating a sense of community. It also boosts their creativity and compels them to think of new and alternate ways of making.





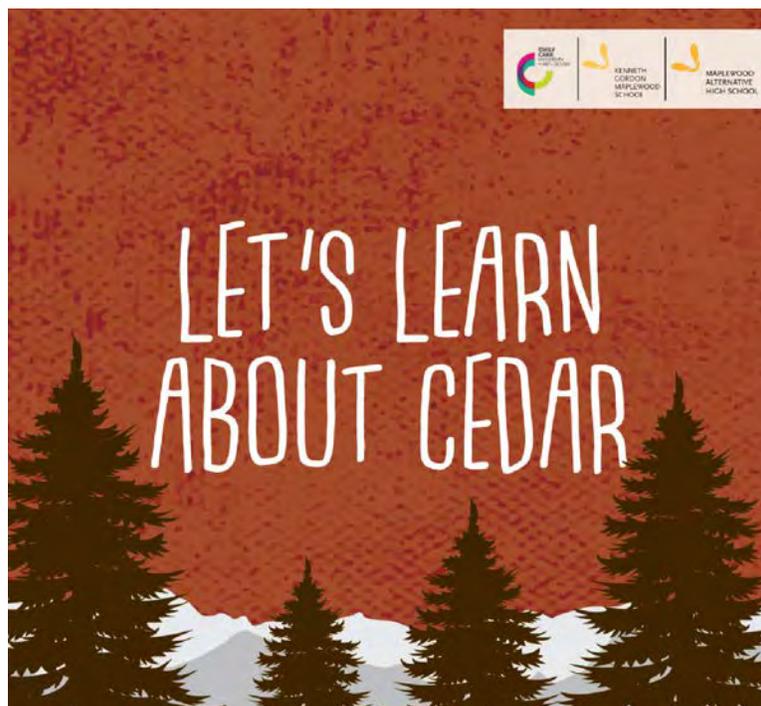
We also worked on a tree book similar to the animal book so that the students can create a forest for the animals. Ultimately the students can put together the trees and animals as a bigger installation in the school premise giving them a sense of achievement. Post this, our endeavor will be to develop craft activities using only natural materials that can be collected respectfully (sticks, rocks, moss, etc)







The Cedar is an important resource in the Sḵw̱x̱w̱ú7mesh (Squamish) culture. It is used for making a range of smaller items like baskets, bowls accessories, and for bigger ones like huts and houses. KGMS plans on inviting a Sḵw̱x̱w̱ú7mesh (Squamish) artist to teach children the basics of Cedar weaving. To supplement this, we developed a Cedar book that uses the Cedar as the main focus to tell the story of the Sḵw̱x̱w̱ú7mesh (Squamish) people over the years. It can also be distributed as an individual book.



Cedar is a well known resource of the Skwxwú7mesh stelmexw, the Squamish people. The Squamish people use the versatile wood in many aspects of their lives.




HARVESTING

At a certain time of the year the Yellow or Red Cedar is harvested. Depending on which month you go between April and July. The Cedar can be very generous or it will make you work for it. We only take one piece from each tree. The reason for this is so the tree can heal itself as it continues to grow.

Once it is stripped from the tree then it is cleaned of the outer bark. You are left with the inner bark, which is the part of the tree that is used for creating numerous pieces.




It takes time and patience for this process. Depending on the length of the strip, it could take up to two hours to complete this process.

We have only just scratched the tip of the iceberg on what seems to a massive project with huge potential. There's still a long way to go and we hope to continue this endeavor. What started as a project to make KGMS children aware of the Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) language and culture turned into a project that involved understanding and using indigenous methods of learning. These methods can be employed not just for teaching Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) but for other subjects as well.