Retrospection: A teacher looks back at the school

NBE3U, Unit 3: Writing Back, Lesson 9. 75 minutes. Teacher lesson plan.

Lesson at a glance

In the last of her 1900 essays, Zitkála-Šá is no longer a pupil but a teacher at an Indian school, and she sees how the system performs for its visitors. Publishing this in a national magazine, read by the people who paid for such schools, was a risk. The essay's metaphors build to a question readers could not easily forget.

What students do: Students read “Retrospection,” analyse how the essay exposes “sample work” made for visitors, trace an extended tree metaphor, discuss the risks and choices of publishing this critique in 1900, and write their own short retrospection in a distinctive voice.

Curriculum expectations

Code	Students will…
C1.6	analyse texts, including increasingly complex or difficult texts, in terms of the information, themes, ideas, and issues they explore in relation to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, explaining with increasing insight how various aspects of the texts contribute to the presentation or development of these elements
A3.1	demonstrate an understanding of the challenges First Nations, Métis, and Inuit individuals and communities face and have faced in controlling their own narratives and resisting colonialist views, as revealed in text forms studied in this course
D2.2	establish a distinctive voice in their writing, modifying language and tone skilfully and effectively to suit the form, audience, and purpose for writing

From The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 9 to 12: First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies (2019), English: Understanding Contemporary First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Voices, Grade 11, University Preparation (NBE3U). A = First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Perspectives and Text Forms in Canada, B = Oral Communication, C = Reading and Literature Studies, D = Writing, E = Media Studies.

Learning goals and success criteria

Learning goals	Success criteria
• We are learning to analyse how an essay builds its ideas through metaphor and example. • We are learning to write a reflective piece in our own voice.	• I can explain what the visitors see and what they miss. • I can trace the tree metaphor and explain its meaning. • I can explain why publishing this essay in 1900 mattered. • I can write a short retrospection in my own voice.

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Materials and preparation

- **Slides:** Retrospection deck.
- **Handouts:** Metaphor Ladder (page 1), My Retrospection (page 2).
- **Reader:** Zitkála-Šá, “Retrospection.”

Lesson sequence

Time (min)	Part	Teacher	Students	Look for
0–8	**Hook**	Looking back.	Discuss.	
8–25	**Read**	“Retrospection.”	Read.	
25–40	**Sample work**	What visitors see.	Analyse.	
40–55	**The tree**	Metaphor ladder.	Trace.	Metaphor developed.
55–75	**Write**	Your retrospection.	Write.	Distinctive voice.

Differentiation

- **Support:** Paragraph summaries and the metaphor ladder partly filled.
- **ELL:** Glossary: indignation, exhibition, uprooted, semblance.
- **Challenge:** Compare her critique with an inspector's report or a school's own promotional material of the period.

Assessment

Type	Tool	Purpose
Assessment for learning	Metaphor Ladder and retrospection	Development of ideas (C1.6), narrative control (A3.1) and voice (D2.2)

Retrospection: key points

- **Sample work:** Inspectors and visitors saw “students' sample work made for exhibition” and left satisfied.
- **What they missed:** Unqualified staff, neglect, and the children's loss of language and family.
- **The tree:** “Like a slender tree, I had been uprooted from my mother, nature, and God”; then “a cold bare pole … planted in a strange earth.”
- **The lightning:** She hopes her “mute aching head” will one day “flash a zigzag lightning across the heavens”: the essay itself is that flash.
- **The risk:** She published a critique of the schools in a magazine read by their supporters, while still young and dependent on that world.
- **The final question:** Whether “real life or long-lasting death lies beneath this semblance of civilization.”

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Teacher notes

- Before reading, name the content (boarding and residential schools, separation from family, loss) and remind students they may step out, pass, or talk privately. This course discusses colonization, residential schools and their effects. Some students and families carry this history personally. Support: Hope for Wellness Help Line (for Indigenous people across Canada, 24/7, by phone or online chat at hopeforwellness.ca; English and French, with Cree, Ojibway and Inuktut on request at certain times), 1-855-242-3310; Kids Help Phone, 1-800-668-6868 or text 686868; 9-8-8 Suicide Crisis Helpline (call or text 988); National Indian Residential School Crisis Line, 1-866-925-4419.
- Zitkála-Šá taught for about two years at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania in the late 1890s (Britannica). “An Indian Teacher Among Indians,” which ends with “Retrospection,” appeared in the Atlantic Monthly in 1900.
- The essay includes harsh descriptions of individual staff (“opium-eater,” “inebriate”). Focus on the system she exposes: sample work for visitors, and a question about “real life or long-lasting death.”
- For the writing task, students look back at an earlier version of themselves (a school year, a skill, a belief). Personal topics are optional; invented narrators are fine only if they are non-Indigenous, and no student writes as a boarding or residential school student. Do not ask Indigenous students to speak for their communities, to share personal or family histories, or to act as experts. Every student's participation in sharing is optional.
- Historical texts use the words of their time, including terms now considered offensive (for example, “Red-skin,” “savage,” “squaw,” “half-breed,” “Eskimo”). We quote accurately when analysing, explain why these terms are harmful, and use today's terms (First Nations, Métis, Inuit, Indigenous, or the specific Nation) in our own words. Readers may say “[skip]” instead of reading a slur aloud.

Coming up

Lesson 10, Hakadah.

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