The Problem: How to ask an Elder

Scene #1

Jane and Paul are with others, discussing an assignment, which asks that they are to learn more about the creation story from their own community. They then realize that they are going to have to ask an Elder, “How do they do this?” They decide to go and to meet with Jane’s aunt who will help them to understand who and how to ask an Elder.

Discussion Questions:

What is the proper protocol when asking an Elder for help?
What is it like learning from an Elder?
How is it different from learning in a regular school?
Who in their families would be able to recommend an Elder? The families may want to know which Elder the student will be meeting.

Problem: Learning in a traditional way is different than learning in a classroom.

Traditional ways involve values of respect for all life, patience, helping, earning knowledge, learning from the natural teachings of the environment, interdependence, responsible sharing and other traditional values.

Scene #2

Jane and Paul meet at Jane’s aunt’s home. The aunt takes time to great them and then starts to bake bannock and make tea. All the while she is telling a story and the students wonder if they will ever get a chance to ask their question. She begins to tell them a story about when she was out picking berries with an Elder. The story includes the offering of tobacco, a gift and bringing the Elder some food. The story is about how while they are picking berries, and how the Elder teaches Jane’s aunt about how they would offer tobacco to the mother earth and pray then gather berries
and teach the young ones, then when back home they would dry the berries, store the berries, and use them for healthy living. After a full day of berry picking, the bear comes and thinks that it is his turn to have some berries. “We all have to learn to live together and to respect all life.” The aunt tells the story in a way that makes the two students laugh.

The two students are restless as the aunt tells another story about when she went to see her grandfather to learn about the plants that she would need to help her daughter who was sick. She would give tobacco, food, a gift, tea and a blanket which represented love and warmth to her grandfather. Her grandfather would teach her what to do and over time he taught her how to pick the medicine, with good prayer, peace in her heart, and offering tobacco to the land. She knew that there would be others who would want to learn this but that they were not ready to learn. They would be in a hurry and not understand the sacred connection with the land. She also told them that there was a time when all of that was hidden because it wasn’t safe enough to talk about traditional ways and how some of the traditional ways are coming to be shared, slowly.

Jane’s aunt speaks about the old ways of learning and then how things changed: the treaties, the residential schools, the reserve system, the Metis settlements. This takes quite a while and then the aunt speaks about how it is important to learn both the traditional ways and to go to school to learn the new ways. “The world has many histories coming together and we are careful with what we share because not everyone will understand.”

Finally, with the word school, is mentioned and Jane senses that it is time to ask the question about learning a creation story. Jane’s aunt replies that they would have to go to an Elder and they would have to do this respectfully, with patience, and to offer tobacco and gifts to the Elder. The Elders need to survive too and in the old days it was the responsibility of the community to make sure that the Elders were cared for. Paul is surprised to hear that Jane’s aunt recommends that they go to see Paul’s great-uncle.

Discussion Points:

Examine the traditional values that are stated in the problem and give examples of these values from the scene or from what the students have learned within their own communities.

Discuss the ways of teaching that the aunt used when compared with learning in a modern classroom.

Discuss possible reasons for the differences.

Discuss the statement made by the aunt that it is important to learn both from the traditional ways and the modern ways.

Problem: The teachings from an Elder involve a protocol, what is the protocol for the Elders within your community?
Scene #3

Jane and Paul and the others then begin to discuss how long it took to ask the question and about how hard it must have been during the times when they couldn’t speak their language and residential schools. Then they brainstorm how to gather what they need to offer the Elder. Jane will ask her aunt to help with tobacco, tea, food and a gift. Paul will see what he can do to make money for a blanket, cloth and some money to help the Elder with his expenses.

Discussion Points:

What are the protocols for asking an Elder for help within your community?
Why is protocol used when learning from an Elder?
What is the role of tobacco as an offering?
Who cares for the Elders within your community?

Problem: The teachings from an Elder include helping, respect and wisdom about what is to be shared. Why are some teachings not shared?

Scene #4

The two meet at the school and talk about how they appreciate how today they are able to talk about traditional ways. They are on their way to the Elder’s, Paul’s great-uncle. Paul never thought to ask him about the traditional teachings. He could see that he would burn the sweet grass, but didn’t realize that his uncle might know so much about traditional ways. His uncle was his grandfather’s brother and he didn’t even know how old he was. He always felt that his great uncle was kind and helping, but never thought to ask him questions before today. “He must have seen a great deal in his lifetime.”

They meet the uncle and they present their gifts and offerings. He quickly puts them to work bringing in wood for the winter. Finally they go inside the uncle’s house and they sit in the living room. The uncle brings out the sweet grass and lights it. He tells them about how hard it was to find sweet grass this year because the farmers are using so much of the land that was his usual picking spot had how the old field had been ploughed under for a crop. He then tells them about a time when sweet grass was easy to find, but how they could only light it when no one was watching. Now he lights it whenever he wants to. He says it helps him to remember the land, the old ways and to feel at home. “It is getting to be a busy world now.”

Then he tells them about when he was young and how he liked to help out by making sure that moose meat went out to all of the old people and how he would end up spending half a day at one house. His father would wonder about how his son was ever going to get the meat to everyone if he stopped to visit every time, and then would tease son about too much of the good bannock when he was visiting. The uncle
tells them that he learned a great deal by just helping out and listening to the old people. Sometimes they would just tell stories and then there would be a time when there were real special teachings. “These teachings, they would take their time to teach me when I was ready.”

Then the uncle began to talk about the differences in modern schools and how the student does not always have the time to understand the importance of each teaching. “There is so much for you to learn now.”

With the conversation now focused on school, Paul tells his uncle that they are to do write about a creation story. The uncle holds the sweet grass and asks them how does the grass grow?

They tell him about the soil, water, sun, and protection from those who don’t know to not farm it.

The uncle nods and says that there are many good stories that can be told, but that both Paul and Jane need to know what is not yet ready to be shared. The uncle shares that he learned that many different people have many different stories. There are also those who have theories about our history, our culture, and stories. The history is in this land and those who are connected feel that history. Only certain people have the gift of knowing the creation story because it is only shared when it is time. The uncle tells them that it is a story that carries a great deal of responsibility. It is a story that comes when people are older and they can see more stages of life. This sweet grass tells the story of how we must be balanced, sensitive to the land, and allow the traditional culture to come through in a good way.

Then the uncle says, “So you need a creation story for school”. How about if you tell the story from the point of view of the sweet grass and about how this community was created and how people are now coming back to the land and to the Creator to listen to the stories. Do you think that idea would work at school? I wonder what the sweet grass will see over the next hundred years?”

“There are many Aboriginal nations in Alberta and the sweet grass has seen these different nations during times of war and peace with each other and then when other cultures came. The sweet grass has seen a great deal and the land remembers everything. What has the sweet grass seen?”

Discussion Points:

Why wouldn’t the Elder tell Jane and Paul what they wanted to hear?

What would cause the Elder to not share the story?

From the history of the students, what would the story of be from the perspective of the land?

Problem: The many Aboriginal histories that gather on one area of land.
Scene #6

Jane and Paul and the others are sitting in school as Jane reviews what the old man had taught them. They then decide to build the story by taking cardboard box and making a diorama that demonstrating old times, contact times, and modern times. Jane and Paul then realize that they come from different histories. Jane is Stoney or Nakoda and Paul is Cree. They then decide to do both histories and many different scenes and then help each other to gather the supplies. Then Jane says, I think that we need some sweet grass to tell the story and then suggests that they invite Paul’s uncle to come to the class, bring sweet grass and to then share their stories with him and invite him to share any stories that he may want to tell. They go back to gathering tobacco, tea, food and expense money to help the old man and they decide to go and ask him.

Discussion Points:
- What is the pre-colonization history of your land?
- How is this history kept?
- What was the impact of colonization on this history keeping?
- How many different Aboriginal nations are there in Alberta today?

Scene #7

Paul and Jane are building scenes and storyboards that capture a general history of their area. They have had to visit the Elder, Jane’s aunt and other community members to gather this information. Then Paul stops, “Jane, why do you think that people are not ready to hear our creation story?”

Jane replies with thoughts around common misunderstandings regarding the origins of Aboriginal people, the impact of colonization, fears around holistic ways of learning, role of prayer in learning and survival, and how she too is only beginning to re-learn her own history and some of the teachings. She speaks about how she goes to see her aunt more often now and how she is helping out and learning more of the traditional teachings. “I guess I wasn’t ready to learn before and maybe I am not the only one like that. My aunt sure knows a lot of stuff that I never knew.”

Discussion Points:

What would it look like to develop an example of your community during pre-contact, colonization, and self-determination times of history? How would those examples be different from the examples of other Aboriginal communities within Alberta?