

Lesson: Promises of Reconciliation: Exploring the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Bentwood Box

By Tara Jacklin

Overview:

Students will learn about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada and explore items placed in the Bentwood Box as part of the national gatherings as commitments to reconciliation. Students will consider how the items relate to our responsibility to uphold human rights, particularly with respect to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People. Students will consider their own their promise of reconciliation.

This action is an expression of understanding their role in reconciliation, which is best done in the context of a larger journey. We encourage teachers to help students find achievable actions to uphold human rights and to revisit and reflect on their commitments regularly.

Grade Level: Adaptable for grades 5 to 12

Learning Outcomes:

Students will:

- Understand the purpose and significance of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada.
- Explore the items placed in the Bentwood Box during national gatherings.
- Learn about a diversity of individual and organizational human rights actors and understand that there are many ways to uphold and defend human rights.
- Articulate a personal commitment to reconciliation and revisit the commitment in an ongoing way.

Resources:

- [Truth Before Reconciliation – Mino-pimatisiwin: Living the Good Life](#), 2024.
- [Truth and Reconciliation Commission reports](#), National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation.
- [The Bentwood Box](#), National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation.
- [Imagine a Canada contest](#), National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation.
- [Have a Heart Day](#), First Nations Child & Family Caring Society.
- [Project of Heart](#)

Background Information:

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was established in 2007 as the result of the Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, which was a class action settlement between Survivors, the Government of Canada, the Assembly of First Nations and Inuit representatives, and the church bodies that had run Residential Schools. The settlement provided monetary compensation to the Survivors and also established funds to support educational and commemorative activities and provide emotional and psychological support to Survivors. The TRC was established as part of the settlement to document the history and legacy of the Residential School System, primarily through the oral testimonies of Survivors of the system. For six years, the TRC travelled the country and gathered testimonies from more than 6,500 witnesses. In 2015, the TRC issued its final report, which made 94 recommendations for advancing reconciliation in Canada. The 2015 report, and supplementary reports, can be accessed on the website of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR).

At the TRC's national events, individuals and organizations were invited to contribute an item to a Bentwood Box, created for the TRC, as a personal symbol of their commitment to reconciliation. Items were gifted from hundreds of individuals and organizations, including Survivors and inter-generational Survivors, government bodies and agencies, cultural organizations, religious organizations, universities, not-for-profit organizations, and many more.

"What's actually in there are deep and sincere promises to make this country a better place and address past wrongs," explained Ry Moran in a 2015 CBC article, who was the Director of Statement Gathering for the TRC.

Bentwood boxes are a craft of First Nations on the west coast of North America. A single piece of wood is steamed and bent to shape. The boxes are used for storage, ceremonies and even cooking. The TRC's Bentwood Box has a ceremonial purpose. Here is how the NCTR describes it:

"The Bentwood Box is a lasting tribute to all residential school Survivors. The sacred box and the items in this collection are deeply personal symbols of their experience... Commissioned by the TRC in 2009, the Bentwood Box travelled with the TRC to its eight national events throughout Canada, where people placed personal items into the box to symbolize their journey toward healing and expressions of reconciliation."

Coast Salish artist Luke Marston of Stz'uminus (Chemainus) First Nation carved the Bentwood Box. To do so he steamed, bent and carved the box in from a single piece of sold-growth red cedar. The artistic styles and imagery throughout the Bentwood Box represent those of different First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples.

The NCTR has created digital versions of the items that were submitted to the Bentwood Box. They can be viewed at archives.nctr.ca.

Lesson Activity:

This lesson is best once students have a good understanding of the history and legacy of the Residential School System in Canada and know how they can take action toward reconciliation today. Students should understand the individual and collective responsibility that all people in Canada have for addressing past injustices and building respectful relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in this country. Students should also have an understanding of human rights and the concepts behind the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Introducing the Bentwood Box

Have students read pages 13 and 14 of *Mino-pimatisiwin: Living the Good Life* to learn about the Bentwood Box. The Canadian Museum for Human Rights has an interactive version of the Bentwood Box available on its app, which you could download and show to students.

Share an excerpt from an interview with artist Luke Marston explaining the images on the box from the NCTR website. Have students explore photos of the box, looking for the images and symbolism that Marston discusses in his interview.

Inside the Bentwood Box

As a class, explore some items that were placed in the Bentwood Box. You can explore the full collection through the NCTR website, or begin with the items suggested in **Appendix IV**. Click on the item names to access more information through the archive's catalogue.

The items placed in the Bentwood Box each carry deep significance. These objects are personal commitments and they represent the histories, cultures, and experiences of the people and communities who contributed them. It is important to remember that their meanings are not fixed or universal. Instead, the meaning is created and shaped by the owners and the cultures to which they belong and ought to not be recreated.

The items highlighted in **Appendix IV** represent commitments to upholding human rights and Indigenous rights in Canada. They can be used to spark conversation about reconciliation and how everyone can play a role in defending and protecting human rights.

As you explore the items, have students consider some of the following questions:

- What is this item? What can you find out about the individual or organization that contributed it?
- How does this item make you feel, and why?
- How does this object relate to human rights? To Indigenous rights? To the rights of the child?
- How does this object relate to our responsibility to uphold and defend human rights? Can you make connections to specific articles in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child or the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People?
- Who is responsible for upholding and protecting human rights? What kinds of actions can be done to protect human rights? Who can do these actions?
- What can you find out about the status or progress of this commitment, if applicable?

You can also search the NCTR database for an Expression of Reconciliation from a city, community or organization that connects with your local context. Conduct follow-up research or reach out to community members to learn more about the item. If appropriate and applicable, think of ways you and your students can help fulfill the commitment.

The Future of the Bentwood Box

The NCTR says that “submitting an item to the Bentwood Box is a sacred ceremony involving the individual committing themselves to the process of reconciliation.”

As a respectful way to honour the legacy of the Bentwood Box, have students think of an item that reflects their commitment to reconciliation and personal action. It could be a written statement, a poem, a song, or an object, for example.

Have students share their promises and reasoning with the class through conversation. Together, decide a way to honour the legacy of the Bentwood Box by sharing your commitments with your broader community. You may consider participating in a larger initiative like Project of Heart or Have a Heart Day, hosted by

the First Nations Child & Caring Society, or the Imagine a Canada contest by NCTR.

Schedule time later in the year to revisit their promises and reflect on their progress, and potentially set new promises and commitments with them.

Appendix IV: Bentwood Box Items

This list features just a few of the hundreds of items that were placed in the Bentwood Box during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's national events. Click on the item names to view a digital copy of the item. Please consult the NCTR archives for any requests related to the usage of the records.

Please review the items and their information in advance and ensure that your students are prepared for the topics that may be discussed. Ensure they have any necessary background knowledge and are alerted for anything that may be triggering.

When browsing the NCTR archive, remind students that the items placed in the Bentwood Box each carry deep significance. The meaning of each item is not something we can fully understand from the outside. It is a meaning that is lived, experienced, and passed down within the communities from which they come.

<i>Name</i>	<i>Archival Description</i>
Banner in memory of Mrs. Nora Bernard [English]	Banner in memory of Mrs. Nora Bernard presented at the Atlantic National Event. The tribute recognizes Nora Bernard as an Indigenous activist and residential school Survivor whose campaign for Indigenous rights inspired nationwide Indigenous class action litigation that lead ultimately to the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement.
Beechwood Cemetery Statement of Reconciliation [English]	A Statement of Reconciliation from Beechwood Cemetery stating that the work done by Doctor Peter Henderson Bryce and his report titled "The Story of a National Crime Being an Appeal for Justice to the Indians of Canada" embodies the spirit of reconciliation. The statement also mentions that the Cemetery will erect a Great Canadian Profile Marker near Bryce's grave.
The Government of Canada's Residential Schools Apology [Bilingual]	John Duncan, Federal Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, submitted these items to the Bentwood Box during the Atlantic National Event on October 29, 2011.

Name	Archival Description
Expression of Reconciliation from Carolyn Bennett [Bilingual]	Bentwood Box submission includes a copy of Private Members' motion No. 402 which called for the implementation of the TRC's Interim Report recommendations concerning education about residential schools. Dr. Carolyn Bennett placed this motion before the House of Commons on June 21, 2012 and it was explained that the Government of Canada denied consent for the item to proceed as a motion so it will not be debated in the House of Commons.
United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Mohawk	Helen Gabriel and Hilda Nicholas submitted these items to the Bentwood Box during the Quebec National Event on April 27, 2013.
Expression of Reconciliation from the Sikh Community of Canada [English]	Items submitted by the Sikh Community of Canada at the British Columbia National Event on September 21, 2013.
Expression of Reconciliation from National Association of Friendship Centres [Bilingual]	Representing The National Association of Friendship Centres, the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, the Winnipeg Boldness Project, Community Foundations of Canada, Inspirit Foundation, Martin Aboriginal Education Initiative, Vancouver Island University, and SmartSaver, Stephen Huddart and Diane Roussin submitted these items to the Bentwood Box during the Ottawa Closing Event on June 1, 2015 at Ottawa, Ontario.
Letter from "We the Elders" [English]	Document states: "We the elders of Long Plains First Nation request chief and council to fight for loss of use and take all necessary action to receive our rights to land claims." The first and second page contain the signatures of elders. <i>2 pages, photocopied.</i>
Documents on "Window to the Future" Stained Glass [Bilingual]	Descriptions in French and English of the Giniigaaniimenaaning or "Looking Ahead" stained glass window by artist Christie Belcourt. This window is located in the Parliament building and depicts Canada's relationship with Indigenous people.
Letter of intent from Librarian and Archivist of Canada, Guy Berthiaume [Bilingual]	A framed letter of intent dated June 1, 2015 from Guy Berthiaume, Librarian and Archivist of Canada, addressed to the Director of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation. Berthiaume acknowledging the role played by Library and Archives Canada by contributing records to the commission, to continue to facilitate access to its holdings in the future, and to work with the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation.

Name	Archival Description
Assemblée nationale du Québec Statement of Support [French]	A framed copy of a motion adopted unanimously by the Assemblée nationale du Québec on Tuesday, April 23, 2013 in support of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.
Young Women's Christian Association Canada's Framed Statement of Reconciliation [Bilingual]	A framed copy of Young Women's Christian Association Canada's commitment to reconciliation. Statement lists YWCA Canada's commitments which include strengthening partnerships with Indigenous communities and organizations, developing succession plans for leadership positions, working to end violence against Indigenous women, develop programs for Indigenous girls and young women, and working to end homelessness of Indigenous girls and women.
Statement of Reconciliation from Canada's Big City Mayors [Bilingual]	A framed copy of the "Statement of Reconciliation from Canada's Big City Mayors" outlines this organization's commitment to reconciliation.