

Historica Canada Education Portal

Memento Mori: Bringing the Classroom to the Cemetery

Overview

Early graveyards offer the educator a unique opportunity to employ primary historical information to engage and excite students as they learn about their local history. Information gained from the stones relating to birth and death dates, surnames, and family relationships have a practical application in the study of history. Gravestones should also be viewed as a form of expression capable of providing insight into aspects of eighteenth and nineteenth century life. The visual imagery of the motifs is an early form of folk art expression. There is a deeper more symbolic function to the motifs which parallels contemporary thoughts in religious philosophy and contemporary culture.

Aims

By the end of the program students will be able to:

- Formulate questions for research and inquiry
- Organize, record and present information gathered through research
- Select and use a variety of primary and secondary documents

- Identify key people, places and events in community history

Activities

Procedures:

Introduction:

Conduct a pre-visit session to outline expected behaviors (Cemetery Manners) while on the field trip and deal with any sensitivity or anxiety issues that may be present (for example, is a student nervous about visiting a cemetery? Are there any cultural taboos to discuss?). Discuss the difference between primary and secondary resources and how to consider the credibility of sources. Provide students with a brief history of the chosen cemetery and its context within the community's history. Encourage students to think about research projects they may wish to pursue. Discuss some possible topics and also give examples of possible projects; poems, narratives, maps, pictorial presentations, graphs, creative writing, artistic renditions, sculpture etc.

Cemetery Field trip (45 minutes to 1.5 hours, depending on size)

Upon arrival at the cemetery, briefly review the history. Have students work in pairs to explore the cemetery (or if large, use a section).

Suggested questions for discussion:

- What were the most common motifs seen?
- How many different shapes of gravestones were seen?
- Did students recognize any names from the gravestones?

- Did students observe any patterns? Examples of illness?
- What did students notice about the condition of the stones? What types of material held up best? Worst?
- Were there any interesting or unusual epitaphs seen?
- What did students find most interesting about the cemetery?

If possible follow up the field trip with a visit to the local museum/archives/historical society or local history collection to allow students to investigate supplementary material for their presentations. Resources to consider include census records, business directories, newspapers, genealogy files, photographs, written histories, and biographies. Most heritage sites will welcome students, with prior arrangement. Remember material will generally not be able to be removed from the site.

Classroom work:

Give students sufficient time to prepare a presentation. Discuss appropriate research materials. After the presentations, have a wrap-up session where students discuss what they learned from the cemetery field trip and how their perceptions of a cemetery have changed. What did they learn from the presentations? Encourage students to donate their research to the local archives

Evaluation:

Assessment and Evaluation:

Keep notes on the students' perceptions of touring the cemetery. Prepare a rubric to assess the projects of the students. Include criteria relating to use of resources, organization of ideas, critical and creative thinking

skills, and presentation techniques.

Reflection/Follow-up

What worked well and what didn't? Why? How will you improve the field trip next time? What pre-planning could have been done? What were the most asked questions of the students? What, if any, were their anxieties about being in a cemetery? Call Cemetery Manager and museum staff (if necessary) to thank them for their assistance.

Option pre-planning:

Call Cemetery Manager or Caretaker to inform them of your intention to visit. Discuss any details such as date and number of students. Consider arranging a guide for the cemetery or visit the cemetery prior to the fieldtrip to orient yourself and choose an area for research. Research and prepare a brief history of the cemetery. If required arrange a follow-up trip to the local museum, archives or historical society for further research.

Resources

[The Association for Gravestone Studies](#)

[Cemeteries - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Tombstones - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Funeral Practices - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)