

Kumeyaay curriculum a useful model for schools

One of the state's most comprehensive model curricula for teaching students about a tribe's history and culture was created by Michael Connolly Miskwish, a member of the Kumeyaay tribe from the San Diego area who has also been an adjunct professor at San Diego State University for 20 years.

His [Learning Landscapes Educational Curriculum](#) was developed under a grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, with contributions from Stan Rodriguez and Martha Rodriguez, the Kumeyaay Diegueno Land Conservancy, Kumeyaay Community College, and the Sycuan Cultural Department. The curriculum includes modules on Kumeyaay history, culture, land management practices, and astronomy.

The material can be adapted for use at virtually any grade level, and offers a review of Kumeyaay and California history that meshes well with the History-Social Science Framework for 4th grade. "I wanted to make sure it was something that teachers could use and that it would be easy for them," says Miskwish.

"If you are looking for a historically accurate, culturally sensitive curriculum for 4th grade teachers to use instead of the traditional project to create models of the Spanish missions, you found it in Mike and his team's work," says Bob Bordelon, an American Indian Education/Title VII Facilitator for the Mountain Empire Unified School District. He works with native educational leaders, principals and the district's Social Studies Committee to incorporate the Kumeyaay curriculum at various grade levels. "We are especially pleased with the games, language activities and model of an e'waa."

Make An E'waa

Materials needed

1' X 1' poster board
(5) 12 inch pipe cleaners
White glue
25 Small rocks (1/2 inch dia)
Green or brown paper (alternate use is string and straw)

Frame the e'waa using the pipe cleaners, secure joints with glue.

Cut paper into strips to create the thatching (alternate, coat string with glue and lay over straw cut in 1 inch strips to create thatching)

Attach thatching to frame
Place rocks around exterior



When completed you may create a door using left over material. A fire pit can be simulated in front of the e'waa. Glue can be spread over the poster board and a light coating of tan sand can simulate the ground. Animals can be drawn on the ground. Other structures such as granaries, ramadas and curing racks can also be created.

Making models of traditional Indian dwellings such as the dome-shaped e'waa is a popular way to infuse culturally relevant lessons about indigenous populations into the 4th grade curriculum. Miskwish's curriculum includes plans for recreating an e'waa with pipe cleaners and construction paper, and he includes formulas for figuring the volume and surface area of the structure to include a bit of math if desired. A dome-shaped dwelling was common in many parts of the state, and the lesson can be easily replicated just by changing the name of the structure.

Impact of the curriculum

Ann Pierce, a counselor and teacher at Campo Elementary, also in the Mountain Empire school district, has seen the Kumeyaay curriculum change the way tribal students approach the mission project. Learning more about their own tribal history and culture has prompted many students to ask their mothers and grandmothers about the way their ancestors were treated.

"Families are talking," she says. "A fair share of our 4th grade tribal students still do the mission project. They can choose not to as well, but we are seeing more cultural reality in their projects – for instance, small mission walls and large graveyards, with e'waas on the perimeter – and the students' oral reports offer a wider perspective than in prior years. They're starting to think more about who they are as tribal people."

For 5th and 7th grades, Pierce says she focuses lessons on the materials in the curriculum's appendices about native science, plants and their relationship to humans, coupling this information with trips to outdoor spaces.

One of the more popular components of the Learning Landscapes curriculum is the cosmology module. "I have the Kumeyaay students review and read up on components of the curriculum, then they teach in their classrooms," Pierce says. During an astronomy unit in 7th grade, Kumeyaay students shared their cosmology and stories, and also used the flashlight on their cell phones to project constellations through pin-pricked paper onto the ceiling. "This was well received by the class as a whole," she says. "They saw native science for the first time." Interestingly, she notes, the tribal students waited patiently for the class to come to consensus on which direction was east – which took 6 minutes!

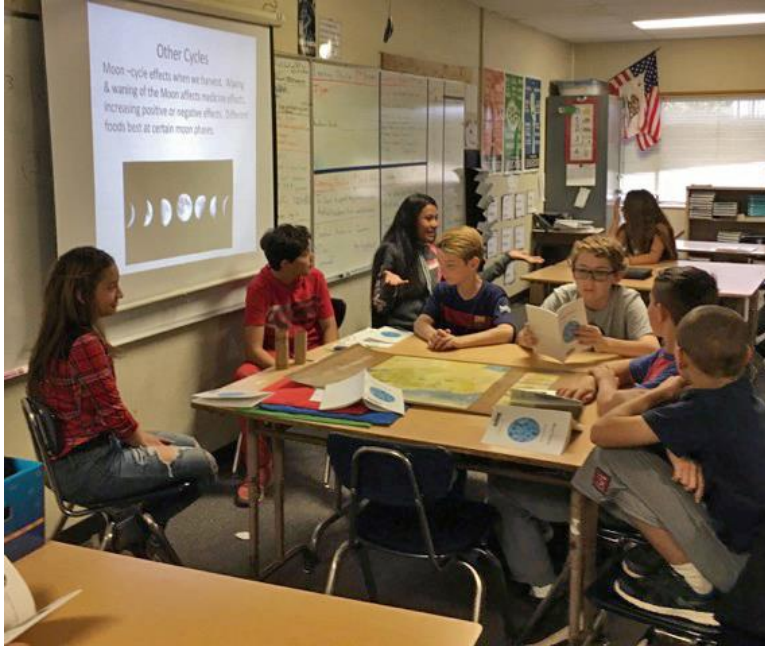


Figure 1: Kumeeyaay students teach an astronomy lesson based on the Learning Landscapes curriculum.

Pierce says the district is fortunate to have a collaboration with San Diego State, the Native and Indigenous Scholars Collaborative, and graduate students who are using Miskwish’s curriculum. “Many of the graduate students are themselves tribal,” she says, “The sharing of practices, stories, implements (such as basket styles) and the discussion it creates is very powerful.”

The curriculum Miskwish and his collaborators created is quite comprehensive, and not all tribal organizations may have the resources to replicate it completely. But it provides a good outline of the types of information schools can use to offer historically accurate, culturally relevant lessons on California Indian history. Tribal members will never be asked to reveal sacred practices or any information they consider private. But tribal input on what California schoolchildren learn in their history/social science lessons is vital.

“I think a lot of tribes are feeling the same thing,” says Miskwish, “that asking other people to design something for us that respects us in an appropriate manner or covers things in an appropriate manner is just never going to happen. Even people who are very well-meaning, there’s always going to be some difficulties with it. It has to come from ourselves.”