Building a Birchbark Canoe

This nonfiction procedure shows and tells the reader how a birchbark canoe is made, using traditional Indigenous methods.

CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Birchbark canoes have been around for thousands of years. We know that the Indigenous peoples of North America were the first to use birchbark canoes and that they used them across the continent; because of this widespread use, it’s hard to say which group first “invented” them. The birchbark canoe is just one type of canoe used by Indigenous peoples. Depending on the natural environment, canoes could be large and seaworthy, like West Coast canoes made from one large tree trunk, or ice- and water-resistant, like subarctic canoes made with sealskins.

Before

If necessary, build background knowledge about birchbark canoes. Have students feel and examine a piece of birchbark, if possible.

Discuss how the practice of making a canoe is connected to the land by inviting students to share their knowledge and experiences related to the materials used to build a canoe and the use of canoes in the natural environment. You might wish to use a KWL chart to record their ideas.

Show the cover and read the title of the book: Building a Birchbark Canoe. Provide a short summary of the text based on the information found on the Contents page. Discuss the three main sections (Introduction, Materials, Construction), and the purpose for each. If necessary, review the important text features of nonfiction procedures. Provide students with sticky notes so they can record any questions that they might have during the introduction and while they read.

Give students a purpose for reading. Say: As you read each section, think about an important fact that is included.

During

Listen to students as they read independently. Read and prompt as needed. Make note of any difficulties that students encounter.
As students read, assist them with solving challenging vocabulary. Remind them of strategies to try, such as using photographs, breaking longer words into parts (prefix, root words, suffix), and rereading.

Make observations regarding students’ ability to locate and record important facts.

On pages 8 and 11, discuss the importance of balance in connection to the environment by calling attention to the care that should be taken when gathering natural resources (page 8: “The cut must not be too deep”; page 11: “A handful of roots is gathered from many different trees”).

After

Revisit the purpose for reading. Have students share their collection of important facts, and use a chart to sort the facts under the headings Introduction, Materials, and Construction. Discuss the new information learned. You may wish to add the new important facts to the KWL chart, if you have used one.

Focus attention on page 16 and discuss the purpose of a glossary.

Encourage students to consider any questions they might have after reading this text, and discuss the options available for further research on this topic. Suggest that students interact with the community by visiting a museum or community centre that has birchbark canoes, interview a community member who has knowledge about birchbark canoes, or find birch trees and take note of their characteristics.

On page 6, draw attention to the paragraph, “Building a birchbark canoe …” Have a conversation about the importance of balance and respecting Mother Earth. Ask: In what ways do Indigenous builders show respect for Mother Earth? Prompt students to provide support for their responses by referring to the text and their own experiences. Encourage students to make personal connections to other ways that they demonstrate care and respect for the Earth.