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Access and Success in Learning: Global Development Perspectives

Creating a Learning Environment using a De-institutionalized Approach to Learning

Conference Themes: Community Development & Skills Development

Cross Cutting Themes: Institutional Partnerships utilizing a De-institutionalize Learning Approach, Peacebuilding, Creating a Learning Community, Engagement Strategies for Dis-engaged Learners

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Introduction

Yekooche First Nation is a small, isolated aboriginal community in British Columbia, Canada which has been working towards finalizing a land claims and self government treaty with the federal and provincial governments. In preparing for the responsibilities that flow with self government, Chief and Council decided to seek assistance from Royal Roads University in helping to prepare the community for this change. This paper is about a partnership that formed between a university and this remote aboriginal community to create a learning environment that would help its members prepare for governance by accessing non traditional forms of learning using technology.¹

This paper describes the background, benefits and challenges of establishing a learning environment and the lessons learned along the way. The paper also describes different approaches and engagement strategies through three stories of youth, who not only learned how to use the technology, but also revived their curiosity through interaction and mentorship that the Learning Centre provided.

Background

Yekooche First Nation is a community of approximately 120 people, located about 85 km northwest of Fort St. James, in the western most Province of British Columbia. The community is remote, accessible only by logging road and has since the mid 1990's been working towards having its own treaty.

In August of 2005, Yekooche reached an agreement-in-principle and is now in the final stages of treaty negotiations. All three parties – Yekooche, federal and provincial governments - recognized that when the treaty is concluded Yekooche First Nation will be required to exercise self government responsibilities and the responsibilities and accountabilities that follow. All three parties also recognized that training and

¹ Yekooche is one of the few remote aboriginal communities with access to high speed Internet.

mentorship in governance, economic development and addressing literacy issues is required to prepare the community for change.

In May 2006, a project team from Royal Roads traveled to the village to examine the existing technical resources in the community. The purpose was to identify any barriers or gaps, either social or technical, that may exist in using technology and to make recommendations as to what would be required to close the gap between the expectations of educational and training institutions and First Nations interests in developing the capacity to govern more effectively.

Assessment

One of the challenges in implementing an effective learning and training strategy is knowing the potential barriers that may prevent access to and use of community-based training. In Yekooche, though the technology exists and high-speed connectivity is wired to each of the homes, lack of experience in its use, minimal computer literacy and the costs of hardware and household connectivity prohibited in-home use. Community access was limited to the children attending school, creating a sense of exclusion and disconnect among community members, families, youth and Elders. In addition to the above, there were also concerns for site security of a community-accessible space and conflicting community ideals and perceptions around how the technology should be used.

Following the project team's visit, a recommendation was made to Chief and Council to create a 'shared, neutral learning space' which was initially known as the community access lab – for training, mentoring and e-learning support. A 'neutral' space was critical to reinforce the 'belonging to all' so that it did not become a potential for conflict between the families, as had happened with the school. The lab was seen as a way to enable band members to stay in the community while they learn. This helped ensure and maintain cultural values, existing support systems, and a sense of place for all its members.

The Initial Engagement

A goal of the 'neutral, shared learning space' was to enable community members an opportunity to explore the use of technology for their learning purposes. Ideally, an interest in learning builds capacity through access to education and training, which would serve as a precursor to self-governance.

Initially, funders decided that an introductory computer literacy course should be offered to provide new users basic training, while learning popular business applications and safe use of the internet as a resource tool. The intent was to eventually provide employment skills, which would be achieved through online learning and employment readiness training.

The opening of the computer lab generated curiosity about this new facility in their village, the technology itself, and the Internet. However, attempts to organize structured class times generated little follow-through by the participants. The introductory computer course that was offered had classes at various times of day and evening, with mornings and weekends defined as open sessions, as an attempt to find a fit with community lifestyles and routines.

Though there was growing interest, commitment to a specific time for 'a class' was elusive. This left more time for drop-in hours which were filled with young children, some youth but few adults. Resources were limited with only six computers; therefore it was not possible to operate both as a drop-in and a class at the same time. However, eliminating the drop-in function for those not interested in a class meant that the equipment would go unused.

The next approach was to try and engage individuals in one-on-one training, allowing for a self-paced approach that would guide them through a technology certificate. This, it was assumed, would remove the necessity of participants having to arrive at a set time. The challenge, however, for the community was that the continuity of learning could not be sustained as the coordinator was only in the village for two weeks out of the month. This created its own setbacks to the progression of the learning, and whatever gains were made were being lost during her absence.

After awhile the Learning Centre increasingly became a drop-in centre for those who wanted to check their email, surf the net or listen to music. Attempts to engage those who came into the centre about training opportunities often drove them 'politely' out the door, stating that they had other things to do as there was nothing to use the training for. The remoteness of Yekooche and lack of economic and employment opportunities was not an incentive for employment readiness training as there was virtually no employment to speak of at the end of the logging road they lived on.

The coordinator realized that what was being offered was neither relevant nor purposeful to sustain their interest. Finally, the coordinator asked Chief and Council for advice on how or whether to continue. Their response was to be patient and to continue to maintain a welcoming space, noting that they will come. They said that community only needed time to accept the centre's presence.

The coordinator's two-week rotation in and out of the community continued. For the youth and the adults who dropped by, the coordinator stopped asking questions about 'learning' and instead watched and listened to how they used the technology, the internet and the sites they frequented. The challenge was figuring out what captured their interest and determining whether it was possible to use their interest as a learning opportunity.

With each return to the village, a trust-relationship began to emerge. The role of the coordinator evolved to become a resource to assist, not to direct. She became 'a tool', just like the mouse and the keyboard, which allowed them to explore topics that interested them. She was no longer an 'instructor' but rather an 'animator' and 'facilitator', helping community members to explore how to use the technology as part of their learning. In other words, she stopped pushing the 'institutional' approach and instead watched, listened and adapted to the flow of the Learning Centre shaped by those who attended.

With this change of approach there was also a change in the 'atmosphere' of the Learning Centre. Attendance steadily rose from about five participants on a good day to about fifteen to twenty daily, and occasionally up to thirty or more participants, with members from each of the families regularly attending, as the project progressed.

Occasionally 'chaos' erupted from the new interest in the Learning Centre, not only for the participants, but for the coordinator as well, as new ideas emerged and projects took shape. Numerous lessons began to surface from this new approach of finding ways to pique their curiosity. There was now a need to stay one step ahead of their learning to ensure they stayed engaged. 'Deinstitutionalized' and 'reciprocal' learning became operative terms when describing the project, as the participants (including the coordinator) continued their exploration of possibilities.

Project-based Training

This new approach led to what became known as 'project-based training'. Here the focus was on the 'goals' the participants identified, rather than the goals or learning objectives a curriculum often imposes.

The coordinator's role was to assist them in shaping their goals into learning outcomes and turning their interests into activities for mentoring. The 'goals' were not necessarily centered in technology, but the technology was both the draw and the tool that connected the participant to their project. For some, the learning was about music and video production, for others it was learning the skills to manage and administer a business, communicating and interacting with family and friends, or for revisiting art, traditional skills, crafts and stories.

Once they identified a project, the learning process unfolded, supported each step of the way by acknowledging the steps taken (however small). With success in realizing their goals, participants continued to stay engaged as their desire to know more and do more pushed their skill development further. With support and encouragement, they began identifying new skills to learn and set new goals.

The Stories

Stories are the center piece to learning in an aboriginal community, in this case drawn from collaborative learning experiences that occurred in the lab. However, these stories would not have occurred if learning was undertaken in the privacy and 'isolation' of their home or through a structured class environment. At times, the Learning Centre would erupt into a 'chaotic mix' of socializing, networking, music and video expression, and meal preparation. The Centre became a gathering place for the whole community; and from the 'chaos' inspiring ideas leading to new elements of learning emerged. Here are a few of the stories to demonstrate the approach.

Raphael's Story: One young man, in his early twenties, who visited the Learning Centre on a number of occasions, was asked about the type of learning that he would like to do. He said that he wanted to finish his Grade 12 someday, but couldn't read or write all that well. Although he expressed interest in returning to school he felt he needed to find a way to make some money before he could do so. There was skepticism from him about dealing with literacy issues or about education generally. Finding a respectful and relevant approach for him was important. Noticing his preference for RAP music that he would listen to for extended periods of time, he was asked 'what it was about the music that attracted him'. He said that he had been a RAP performer, a freestyler, and would like to perform in RAP competitions or 'RAP battles'.

After asking more questions about what a RAP battle was, it became apparent that he had knowledge, passion and a keen interest to produce his own music, to tell his story and eventually to create his own CD/video. The coordinator suggested that he might consider using this interest and goal as a learning project. He was initially challenged with the suggestion, exclaiming, 'where's the learning in that?' He soon realized that he would need to teach the coordinator about RAP, RAP battles and the music, as all of this being unfamiliar to her, in helping him to fulfill his goal.

He had rarely used a computer, had limited reading skills and was reluctant to even try to write because of his spelling difficulty. He was also known in the community for having a difficult attitude and a troubled history, and had little success in school. However, he was curious about the technology and about the potential project ahead of him. He had imagination, desire and drive to make something happen. He also had a pride and a passion for his family and his community and wanted to tell his stories, both the positive and the negative.

Initially, this young man showed up at the Learning Centre a few times a week and when approached about taking a course or to explore ways that would assist him with writing and reading, he would smile and leave. However, with his curiosity piqued and his imagination engaged, his dedication to his project

was inspiring. His attendance at the Learning Centre increased to the point that he would be waiting at the door when the Learning Centre opened and would be the last to leave at closing, ten hours later, 6-7 days a week. Over a period of about 2 months, he spent hours recording, refining what he had done, then re-recording and eventually compiling two CD's that contained eleven songs each. Although he was at first uncomfortable with the use of the hardware and the recording software, he learned how to use the internet to research 'beats' or sounds for making his music. Soon he became increasingly aware of the learning that was happening while he was pursuing his personal interest. His growing confidence and desire to know more propelled him on. Each time he achieved a benchmark toward meeting his goal, it became the start of the next level of learning. He devoted his time to figuring out how to organize the beats, record his own audio, use the beats to create music progression and maximize audio quality, and finally, burn his own audio CD's.

At first he required assistance and assurance with each step, but over a short period of time only minimal interaction was required. He constantly pushed the boundaries of his learning by reshaping and refining what he wanted to do with the music. He struggled to read the technical manual and research the internet for more options. After burning two CD's he came to realize that although freestyle had been his method of expression, it had its limits in finding the words to express the stories he wanted to share. He decided that to be able to write his own lyrics and to expand his vocabulary was the only way he could better tell his story. Finally, he asked for assistance and, in so doing, he moved to a new level of learning, with a new awareness of what he needed to reach his goals. He now wanted to learn how to spell and write. Literacy had finally become meaningful and relevant to him.

Over the next few months he tackled the challenge of learning to write words that he wanted to use in his music. He carried a notebook with him everywhere he went, jotting down words that he felt would fit in his songs and stories. For the words that he wasn't sure how to spell, he'd ask someone to spell it out. In a short time his notebook was filled with words he had read or heard. He was proud of the work he was doing and enjoying the learning that he had previously avoided.

All this did not happen in isolation. Each day he would take up his place in the corner of the lab and focus on his project in the midst of all the other activities going on around him. His focus, his commitment to his work and the results were observed by others and especially by his companions who he would have normally hung out with. With his absence they would come to see where he was and what he was doing, which led them to ask how they could begin a similar project.

Initially he referred his friends to the coordinator for assistance, but she redirected them back to him as he had been 'the teacher' and knew best the process, the challenges, and the commitment that was needed. With growing confidence, he assisted them with the use of the equipment and coached them on how to listen to the beats and find the words inside to tell their story. With each individual he assisted, he reinforced his own skills and understanding. This brought acknowledgement from his peers and community for his accomplishment. His relationship with others began to change as he was no longer seen as someone to avoid, but rather someone who was succeeding in their dreams. This created a positive impact, not only for himself but for all youth in the community.

With the introduction of more sophisticated software and audio recording equipment, including a midi keyboard, he continued to stretch his boundaries of both his music and his skills. By creating his own 'beats', he then tackled the challenge of writing lyrics to a song that he dedicated to the children of the community, sharing the challenges of growing up, letting them know that it was up to them to look out for

themselves.² With each step of his accomplishments Raphael moved further away from his previous life-style patterns, allowing him to embrace a different sense of who he was and where he wanted to go. From his willingness to engage in a learning project that was meaningful to him, he not only developed new skills and sense of greater well-being, he had now demonstrated the positive impact of this engagement to others in a constructive way.

Two years later he took a training course in prospecting and scored ninety-seven percent, one of the highest marks in the class.

Mitchell's Story: Another youth who frequented the Learning Centre demonstrated a keen interest in video and music clips that he could access online. Though he was initially reluctant to commit to a 'learning project' he was very engaged in helping with technical challenges that arose in the Centre. With highly-intuitive technical skills and his creative touch, he developed a series of video shorts from webcam shots, mined from the hard drives of the lab computers. He then added selected music that enhanced the cam shots through creation of a video. His creative work and ease with the technology identified him in the Centre (and within the community) as someone they could ask for assistance with their own projects. With Mitchell's interest and curiosity piqued, he spent more and more time in the lab. As new media equipment was introduced, he would tackle the challenge of learning how to use it on his own. He continued to hone the skills he had developed by creating his own stories through his passion for video. He progressed from the collecting images mined from the hard drives of the lab's computers, to digital cameras, to a prosumer video camera and professional multi-media editing software.

From the video-shorts that portrayed the essence of the spirit of the Learning Centre, Mitchell's video projects progressed to capturing cultural practices, during seasonal family events, where he provided a snapshot of fish camp on Lake Babine and the skinning of a moose. The stories inspired others who were interested in learning how to use the equipment and handle it with care. He stepped into the role of taking responsibility for the camera and recording equipment, insuring it was maintained and managed in a respectful way.

Mitchell's story began with an intense interest in videos he found on the internet to developing the technical capacity to create his own. As his interest grew, it was important to cultivate that interest by creating new and intriguing 'next steps' through the introduction of more sophisticated software and equipment and learning opportunities. These new challenges he took on, helped to build his confidence and skills which led to him assuming the role of manager, overseeing both the technology and operation of the Learning Centre. He is one of three employees who provide management and technical support, enabling the Centre to remain open during the time when the coordinator was not in the community. Mitchell's willingness to assume responsibility for the Centre and to mentor family, friends and peers, has given him a respected position in his community. As a result of his new responsibilities and his interest to continue developing his skills, he has attended film school, organized community events, advised Chief and Council on technical advancements in the community and completed a Certificate in Mid Management and Leadership from Royal Roads University.

Jodie' Story: As a young mother of three small children, she spent time developing her interests and skills in graphics and online communication and providing software support and document services to members and professionals in the community. In addition, she has been instrumental in creating a welcoming space in the lab by assuming responsibility for food preparation and keeping the Centre clean

² Raphael's song/video posted on YouTube as of April 2009 - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i1UodbOCZsM>

and tidy. Her interest in graphics and online communications drew her to managing the Yekooche Dustl'us Newsletter. To further her interest she enrolled in online courses to complete her Grade 12 and to become IC33 certified. She has also received training to support the First Voices Yekooche Language Acquisition Project. Overall, Jodie provides a key role as administrator of the Learning Centre and has become an inspiring resource to the whole community as outreach for communications, technical, and special projects support.

Many more stories, similar to those above, have emerged. These stories have led to the formation of new relationships among families, through social interaction and mentorship that the Learning Centre provides. Inspired by these stories has led others to pursue their own interests and passions.

The Learning Centre has become a critical resource to the community. As the Centre evolved, a fund was established that enabled community members to apply for project funding they were interested in pursuing. The individual projects ranged from peer and mentoring support in the elementary school, for reading assistance and computer literacy, to development of video and audio recording for documenting community meetings, events, traditional skills and stories. Individuals learned how to prepare a proposal and budget and make a presentation to chief and council who oversaw the fund. Participants learned how to plan and manage projects, to how to report out at the end. Projects initiated included: organizing culture camps, hosting community events, attending conferences, building mountain bike trails, creating traditional dance and regalia classes, and purchasing recreational equipment and music equipment.

Small group and community-focused projects included photo documentation and interviews, creating surveys for community projects and organizing guest speakers and group presentations. Small group learning and inter-family collaboration are key underlying principles for accessing the funds.

The success of the proposal-based projects provided increased incentive for community members to take ownership in creating change and interest in engaging in learning and skill development that was required to develop their ideas and interests. Additionally, each success has inspired more projects and more community members getting involved.

The Challenges

There have been a number of challenges that have arisen throughout the project. To fully appreciate the outcomes it is important to acknowledge the challenges, but in no way do they diminish the successes. Being responsive to community concerns, including communicating the purpose of the Learning Centre and how it came to be, was critical to the success and growth of the project. At the initial stage of the project, questions arose about the funding and which programs or services were perceived to have been 'sacrificed' by the creation of this new entity? What were the costs and value of the resources and services that were being offered? What were the reasons behind why more funds were being spent on the Centre and not elsewhere in the community? And, would it continue or would it end when the funding ran out? In other words, where did the money come from and was it sustainable? Communicating often and openly was imperative to heading off any misunderstandings and to address any concerns and expectations about the project outcomes.

With the increase in activities, attendance at the Learning Centre saw steady growth and usage of the lab was frequently at capacity. With the increase of individual and community projects, ongoing adaptation of the activities is required to support and encourage community readiness and learning style preferences. Resisting the return to institutional learning is important, especially when creative 'chaos' erupts in the pursuit of these activities, or when a compelling need arises to control the learning space or impose

³ Introductory level IT Industry recognized certification

outside models of influence. The key issue for the community is that it does not fall back on relying on an external perception of 'what's best' for the Centre, but instead, encourage community involvement in shaping and reshaping the direction of the Centre in meeting future needs.

Summary

For the community participants, the Centre has provided opportunities to explore learning through curiosity-driven activities, reviving the relevance of learning in their lives, developing skills, experience, confidence and increased capacity to participate and contribute to their community. The staff at the Learning Centre have been acknowledged, recognized and respected by their peers, their community, their leaders and by external organizations and encouraged by everyone to always seek 'next steps'.

Each project the community members have undertaken has led to personal growth. With growth, the Centre becomes a 'place of possibilities', where each possibility enables new skills and knowledge to emerge, especially when learning is seen as relevant to the participants. The creation of internships helped two members learn about technology and administering the Centre – all of which is integral to self-governance.

Further, the successes of the individuals and the Centre have led to new relationships and partnerships that extend beyond the boundaries of the community. As the stories are shared, there is increased support and interest from potential external partners that include government ministries and First Nation organizations. The multitude of learning activities, the preparation of community meals, the gathering and socializing within the Centre creates moments of chaos. But an important lesson is that in the chaos there is an energy that inspires further curiosity and creativity, which begins the circle of engagement once again. This energy would not be generated if accessing the technology or the learning opportunities happened in isolation in people's homes. The Learning Centre has become an integral part of community life, where learning about technology today has led to learning about their past, which prepares them for their future.

Lessons Learned

- Learning centres can play a valuable role in building individual and community capacity when learning occurs in a social and collaborative setting.
- Individual curiosity sets off sparks of interest and initiative among other community members and leads to broader circles of engagement.
- 'Deinstitutionalized' learning requires "thinking out of the box" and focuses on interest and priorities of the community that are collaborative, flexible, respectful and reciprocal
- Project-based training offers an innovative approach as projects often lead to a constellation of possibilities for learning.
- Learning comes from:
 - valuing the vision and interests of individual learners
 - recognizing existing assets, skills, experiences
 - shaping the learning to the individual
 - defining "next steps" builds on interests, passions and progressions that comfortable to the participant.
- A 'learning community' depends on the combined efforts of its members to move ahead.
- Leadership emerges in a variety of ways among those not necessarily considered.

Learning Strategies

'Deinstitutionalized' learning strategies incorporated in the Centre were based on four distinct phases of participant's learning: 'curiosity', 'engagement' 'mentorship' and 'outreach':

Curiosity Phase – exploring an individual's interests and passions

Encouraging the exploration of 'curiosity' through media, expression and story

- Provide an opportunity to explore the technology, the media, and the learning environment
- Demonstrate possibilities for learning, whether it be through the arts - music, video, written, oral - traditional or contemporary
- Create hands-on activities that demonstrate possibilities
- Encourage belonging by including everyone in Centre's activities
- Instill a sense of ownership in their learning and their ability to shape these activities

Engagement Phase – creating focus and opportunity

Providing opportunities to explore ownership of their learning and commitment to following their passions

- Guidance in defining a project that is meaningful, relevant and 'real-world' and based in their curiosity and passion
- Hands-on experience to explore initial steps and possible outcomes
- Support through encouragement and acknowledgement of each step and next steps that follow
- Celebrate all successes, large or small
- Create partnerships with schools, organizations and individuals that will support and reinforce continued skill development and 'next steps' opportunities

Mentorship Phase – supporting individual motivation in pursuing goals

Acknowledging further development of skills and long term goals

- Offer apprenticeship/mentorship for participants
- Provide opportunities to strengthen skills through project-based workshops, where participants can demonstrate, lead and mentor

Outreach Phase – enabling the learning to grow

- Participants should be encouraged to seek 'next steps' and identify required resources for reaching their goals
- Next-steps may include higher education, training, employment, entrepreneurship, apprenticeship or leadership opportunities.
- Ongoing support, encouragement and acknowledgement is critical for the success of the participant as each phase introduces another level of challenge and vulnerability, including moving away from their familiar network of support.

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