

SCULPTING A LEARNING COMMUNITY ON ITS OWN TERMS: THE UPPER SKEENA

by Ron Faris Ph. D. July 13, 2001

The Upper Skeena is the 30,00 square kilometer territory of the Gitksan First Nation in the northwest corner of British Columbia. Today, in an area similar to Belgium, there are about 6,500 persons living in 14 villages in the Upper Skeena valleys. Over 70% are Gitksan and the remainder is from families of European descent - many of whom settled over a hundred years ago.

The region has historically been dependent upon the fish and forest stock, both of which have been depleted by unsound environmental practices, and jeopardized by uncertain world markets and foreign ownership that has had no commitment to long-term local development. The socio-economic conditions are characterized by chronic, massive unemployment ranging by village from 40 to 80% and educational attainment that is below the provincial average. Since about 70% of the population is under the age of 30 the spectre of further deprivation faces the communities. In sum, conditions are akin to those of the so-called Third World.

A Strong Value and Conceptual Base

“Men and women have within themselves and their communities the spiritual and intellectual resources adequate to the solution of their own problems.”

Statement of Purposes (1946)
Canadian Association for Adult Education

In 1999, following a series of locally initiated studies, a group of local citizens submitted a proposal to the Office of Learning Technologies of Human Resources Development Canada to engage in the developmental stage of a Community Learning Network (CLN) initiative. The proposal emphasized the communities' value base by quoting the findings of an earlier community study -

- “ * Youth are our future decision makers.
- * Experiential learning is how we best acquire knowledge and skills.
- * We live here because of a connection to family and the land around us.
- * Stewardship and working with natural resources is central to our identity.
- * We strive for self-reliance, self-sufficiency, autonomy and independence.”¹

Five strategies identified in an associated background study² were cited in the proposal as means of community economic development, including:

¹ *Action 2000. A journey into the human and economic potential of the Upper Skeena.* A-D Communications. 1998

² *Beyond 2000, Creating Our Future.* A-D Communications. 1999.

Increase the involvement of citizens	Involve community members in local planning and problem-solving
Strengthen natural ecosystems	Plan for sustainable management of resources
Put more local money back into the local economy	Buy locally, pursue “value-added opportunities etc.
Support community enterprise	Foster small businesses, organize cooperatives, encourage industry clusters
Build local capacity	Improve community infrastructure (transportation & communication) and local skills and education

The proposal emphasized the importance of “engaging in inquiry, dialogue and action to:

- Build partnerships that integrate formal, non-formal and informal learning opportunities for residents of the Upper Skeena;
- Create opportunities for residents to engage in community-based learning and contribute to the development of healthy, sustainable communities;
- Link learning to action through service-learning/apprenticeships models that support learners as citizens, workers, family members, and lifelong learners; and
- Use learning technologies as a tool for inquiry and collaborative learning.

The strategic approach to creating a learning community involves facilitating learning around three key areas: lifelong learning, community-based learning, and learning technology...”³

Like other learning community projects in B.C., the Upper Skeena Learning Partnership has been informed by U.K research and practice. For example, three inter-related objectives, similar to many U.K communities, include:

- ✓ economic development,
- ✓ social inclusion , and
- ✓ environmental sustainability.

In the Upper Skeena they will be achieved by the strong commitment of Gitxsan and non-Gitxsan leaders to work in a close partnership built on a cross-cultural bridge of social capital.⁴

³ Upper Skeena Development Centre, *Proposal to the Office of Learning Technologies, HRDC, 1999*. The proposal drew upon the growing OECD learning community initiatives in Europe and the UK. It was also informed by the earlier UNESCO reports (Faure, 1972, and Delors, 1996) on lifelong learning.

⁴ Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Simon & Schuster, New York, 2000 and Baron, S., Field, J., and Schuller, T., (eds.) *Social Capital: Critical Perspectives*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000.

Early Action

There was a major hiatus in federal government support of any and all HRDC programs across Canada while the department strengthened its accountability procedures, however the project was approved in November 2000. Meanwhile, the local champions initiated a series of service-learning projects involving local youth. Having viewed the Upper Skeena through a lifelong learning lens it became apparent that two age cohorts, the pre-natal to pre-school, and the in- and out-of school youth, were priority target groups.

Community service-learning, or the application of academic concepts by youth to provide a legacy for their community, has been a central strategy to promote experiential, non-formal learning.⁵ The first service-learning project involved elementary, special education, and high school youth who planned and implemented a project to build a 3 km hiking/skiing trail behind their high school. A second project involved students who created signs in Gitxsan, English and French along the trail to explain local flora and fauna – all part of an eco-tourism strategy.

A third project enabled 11 at-risk out-of-school youth to engage in an initial outdoor education program (rock climbing that created team-building skills and an awareness of the transitory nature of life!). This project laid the groundwork for a Tech Café that further enables non-formal learning opportunities. All three means of experiential learning proved to be a wake-up call for some of the youth. Several youth in each project had life-changing learning experiences and decided to stay in school or return to learning in post-secondary venues.

Yet another service-learning approach entailed several high school girls working with the local literacy group and the Gitxsan health workers to provide “Baby Learning Kits”. New parents were presented with simple reading material on parenting skills and child development as well as books to be read to their infants. Thus a new local partnership enabled collaborating groups to do together what they could not do alone – evidence of the contribution of life-wide approaches to meeting community need.

Two new initiatives have also been created to act as community focal points for building trust, networking and shared values – the social capital that is increasingly important in knowledge-based society. These are the *Learning Shop* and the adjacent *Community Shop*.

“Learning is a social, not an individual activity. Communities are not aggregations of individuals but interactions among individuals – conversations and storytelling are central.”

⁵ Service-learning research indicates that it is a powerful means of promoting citizenship learning, challenging at-risk youth, and of career exploration. Jacoby, Barbara (ed.), *Service-Learning in Higher Education: Concepts and Practices*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1996, is an excellent summary of theory and praxis at the post-school level.

The Learning Shop

With approval of the 3-year pilot project a *Learning Shop* opened its storefront doors in the central village of Hazelton. The *Shop* focuses on providing non-formal experiential learning opportunities - some of which have served as links or pathways to the formal education system. Since November last several hundred learners have engaged in a non-formal learning opportunities including:

Gitxsan Storytelling

Tuesday evenings finds people interested in Gitxsan culture and language meeting to learn the Gitxsan language, develop national songs and dance, and plan cultural events.

Music Jam Sessions

On Wednesday evening local musicians and music lovers get together to practice the art of music conversation. Local guitarists have volunteered to teach interested youth (up to 30 youth now participate). A Summer Busking Festival is being planned.

Teenage Search and Rescue

Teenagers gather together Thursday evening to develop their skills as ground search and rescue volunteer technicians. This provincially certified program also enables youth to earn two applied skills credits for high school graduation.

Mother Goose

One afternoon each week new parents and their babies gather with the local literacy coordinator to learn songs and games to promote healthy language development in their child.

Tech Café

On Friday and Saturday nights youth critique videocassettes, play educational games, and socialize as part of larger community. Outdoor education experiences like rock climbing and hiking are another way of involving them in non-formal and formal learning linked, for example, to a local First Nations Education Centre.

The Community Shop

A near-by *Community Shop* is now opening that will complement the work of the *Learning Shop* by

- Gathering information about community events and resources,
- Facilitating connections between individuals and groups, and
- Highlighting opportunities for social and economic development.

⁶ Thurow, Lester, *The Future of Capitalism: How Today's Economic Forces Shape Tomorrow's World*, William Morrow and Company, New York, 1996.

Some of its services include:

Upper Skeena Calendar of Events

Local events can be publicized at the Shop or at the website: www.upperskeena.ca

The *Sustenance Gallery*

The *Gallery* will highlight new ways people are making a living and areas of potential growth in the Upper Skeena. A *Sustainable Agriculture Directory* that lists agriculture products, related services and locally processed food in the area will be produced.

The Used Bookstore

A partnership with the local literacy group and public library will enable students to run a small business that promotes literacy throughout the community.

Upperskeena.ca,

This Web site will be a virtual, interactive gathering place for the community. It will provide a community data base, and facilitate discussion groups, on-line conferences and other means of using technology to network within the community and among other learning communities developing across the province.

Prior Learning Services

Assistance is provided to people applying for prior learning assessment and credit at formal education institutions.

Summary

Lifelong learning has served as an organizing principle, analytical lens, and social goal from the outset of this project. The life-span dimension enabled a coherent and comprehensive analysis of learning needs of those at different life-stages throughout the community. The life-wide dimension enabled a systematic assessment of the different settings in which learning could be promoted across the life-span, and the wide array of partnerships that were possible if the full learning resources of every sector of the community – civic, public (libraries, museums, health and social service agencies etc.), education (K-20), economic, and voluntary/community – were utilized in active partnerships.

The role of non-formal learning, usually of an experiential nature, in preparing for a knowledge-based economy has become readily apparent. As is the importance of recognizing and building upon the value and knowledge base of the First Nation people who view the learning community model as a re-birth of the traditional experiential learning approach of their culture.

The important role of intangible assets in a knowledge-based economy and society - social as well as human capital – has informed work in the Upper Skeena. Karen Erickson, the able project coordinator, is consciously taking an asset-based approach to her work and analysis, and is using social capital concepts to inform her work. Just as

there is a symbiotic relationship between human and social capital, there appears to be an equally important relationship to be explored between social capital and lifelong learning theory and practice. The Gitksan people inherently understand that learning is essentially a social and community process. Building on the foundation of the best of their community values and beliefs – telling and living their stories - rather than those of the dominant society will be the way forward.

The lifelong learning concept and its offspring, the learning community, is being manifested in the Upper Skeena where the conventional, “more of the same” educational response has had little or no success. The profound, joined-up problems of the community are now being addressed in a more comprehensive and integrated way that calls for evaluating and reporting performance in new ways.

In a learning community like the Upper Skeena evaluation is as much a learning as a monitoring process. New means of participatory, action research will be necessary to enable the local people to not only ask the research questions but also help answer them so that the evaluation process also contributes to community capacity building.

Effective qualitative and quantitative means of assessing the contribution of lifelong learning, social capital, and the communitarian values central to the people of the Upper Skeena will be an increasingly important challenge as they sculpt a learning community on their own terms.

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