

**Crossing borders on a journey to deeper understanding:
Ongoing interactions with our Aboriginal partners within an
educational initiative**

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“Now we’re combining (white thought) with Cree thought, because that’s who we are. We are reversing the effects of colonization.”

Joseph Steinhauer
Blue Quills Cree language instructor

Abstract

A recent initiative of the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta, supported through an ACCESS grant from the provincial government, has provided the opportunity to plan and deliver the final two years of the Bachelor of Education degree in collaboration with Blue Quills First Nations College. We have experienced an ongoing learning process with our Aboriginal partners at Blue Quills College, and the context of our learning includes issues such as planning (the importance of community), program content (course development and delivery), and student support (cultural understanding). Our initial assumptions often led us in interesting directions, and it was only through insights based on cultural teachings from our colleagues, and sometimes through trial and error, that we came to understand many aspects of “native ways of knowing”. We also gained a realization that much of this learning has relevance for all students in the Faculty.

Blue Quills First Nations College is located approximately five kilometres from a small town in rural Alberta, and it encompasses a fascinating history. The main building on the campus is a stately brick building that was formerly a residential school attended by many of the adults in the seven surrounding First Nations communities. In 1971, when the federal government of Canada decided to sell the school, hundreds of native peoples, many of them former school attendees, held a peaceful sit-in and successfully achieved ownership of the buildings and land from the federal government of Canada. They have recently celebrated 30 years of continued growth in the educational offerings and student numbers at the college, and the impact of their work is extending far beyond the college

itself. Within this environment, and with these committed educators, we have been given a rich opportunity to learn first hand the educational implications of the history and culture of our Aboriginal neighbors.

We have gained many insights through an historical review of the effects of colonization shared during a cultural orientation for staff over three days at Blue Quills. This information provided the foundational context for much future discussion and planning. We have become aware of contrasts in the pragmatics of our collaboration, including expectations of the form and content of meetings, approaching the issue of honoraria (when appropriate, for whom, how much?), and how and when one should incorporate ceremony into the day to day activities of the program. We have discussed with our partners from Blue Quills College how one can talk about and carry through with research, attempting an appropriate Indigenous methodology, without feeling like an imposter. We question how one develops a true appreciation of behaviors that are truly representative of cultural differences, and how we can react and plan accordingly.

Ultimately we continue to gain awareness of factors that truly define collaboration in a partnership such as ours.