

INDIGENOUS CULTURES AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF A NEW TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAM

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Paper Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to describe the process used and the challenges encountered when a small post-secondary institution developed a new teacher education program in a diverse multicultural, multi-site, and remote/rural environment. The specific issues dealt with in this proposed presentation include: teacher education program design, cultural collaboration, student diversity and equity, acquiring program accreditation, faculty building, community involvement, building political resolve, accountability, and building collaborative management.

Background and Context

The University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC) was created, at the insistence of the people of the region, by an Act of the British Columbia Legislature in June 1990. This act created the first new public university to be established in Canada in over a quarter of a century. UNBC's mandate is to provide a full range of university programs and services in northern British Columbia. Although UNBC's student population mainly includes students from all areas of British Columbia and Canada, we also have a number of international students (e.g., Russia, Mexico, Japan, China, England, Australia, United States, etc). However, our primary mandate is to provide excellence in teaching, research, and community service to northern British Columbia. This northern area is over 632,762 square kilometers (an area equal to 2/3 of British Columbia) and is home to approximately 414,380 people (Census Canada, 1991).

The challenge of meeting the post-secondary educational needs of this vast region include the issues of a severe climate, vast distances, a resource-dependent economy, and isolation from provincial and national centres of power. In addition, the challenges also include delivering post-secondary educational programs to people spread out in many small communities who are from diverse cultural backgrounds. UNBC is committed to providing post-secondary programs of study not only at its main urban Prince George Campus but also at four regional campuses located throughout northern British Columbia. UNBC's commitment to the north has led it to design programs that are not only sensitive to the cultural needs of this diverse community of people, but also

programs that can be delivered regionally. Since opening its doors in 1994, UNBC has steadily grown each year and has a current student population of 3,500 full and part-time students located on its main campus with an additional 540 full and part-time students located at four regional campuses.

“UNBC services an area that includes the traditional territory of 16 Tribal Councils, 78 First Nations Bands, 4 Metis organizations, and 10 Friendship Centres. Of the 414,380 people living in the region, approximately 30% have self identified their ancestry as Aboriginal. According to Statistics Canada (1996), 17.5% of Canada’s Aboriginal population lives in British Columbia” (First Nations Task Force Report, 2002, p.1). In British Columbia there are approximately 400 teachers of Aboriginal descent out of a total of 54,000 active members of the British Columbia College of Teachers. However, based on the population of the Province, there should be approximately 2,000 teachers of Aboriginal descent (First Nations Education Steering Committee, 2001).

The Education Program - In 1990, an advisory committee with educational representatives from each of the northern regions strongly recommended UNBC’s interim governing council to establish a teacher education program as soon as possible (Report of the Education Advisory Committee, 1990). This recommendation was based on a documented need for teachers who could receive their teacher education in the northern milieu in which they live. It was hoped that those who received their teacher education in the north would be more likely to stay in the north after graduation. Furthermore, the report urged UNBC to build into its program a regional delivery system and a structure to meet the needs of Aboriginal people (Report of the Education Advisory Committee, 1990). However, in 1994 when UNBC officially opened its doors to students, the Provincial Government placed a freeze on the establishment of new teacher education programs in British Columbia based on the feeling that British Columbia post-secondary institutions were already graduating more teachers than were actually needed. Therefore, instead of designing and implementing a teacher education program, UNBC established two MEd programs; one in Educational Counselling and the other in Curriculum and Instruction. By 1999, there were a total of 140 graduate students enrolled in these two programs.

By 1998 the climate in British Columbia had changed and there were now concerns that a large onset of retirements was about to create teacher shortages at the K-12 level. Evidence for such a shortage was documented in the conclusion made by Echols, Grimmett, and Kitchenham (1999) that, "...the aging of the teaching force in British Columbia will create an impending teacher shortage. This shortage will be more obvious in 2003 and it will be most acute between 2005 and 2010" (p. 26). They also concluded that teacher shortages were likely to be more severe in northern regions (Echols, et al., 1999). Therefore, in 1999 UNBC made the development of a teacher education program one of its highest priorities.

Given that there was already a documented shortage of teachers of Aboriginal decent, a priority within the development of the teacher education program was to work collaboratively with Indigenous communities. It was hoped that by working collaboratively it would be possible to effectively address concerns regarding the recruitment and retention of potential teachers of Aboriginal decent, and to ensure that the teacher education program provided adequate cultural content and practices regarding the teaching of K-12 Aboriginal children to all preservice teachers. A second hope was that a collaborative process would provide Aboriginal communities with a true sense of involvement and partnership in the program development process. Finally, it was hoped that this collaborative process would provide a strong political voice when dealing with accreditation and funding bodies.

The Collaborative Process

Given that the communities in northern British Columbia are separated by vast distances, establishing a working relationship with Aboriginal communities required the necessary resources to enable the Chair of Education to travel extensively. Therefore, the President of UNBC provided a program development fund that included a substantial travel budget. While the travel budget did not allow us to meet with every community, it did allow us to meet at least twice with each community that we were able to visit. UNBC collaborated with Aboriginal Education Coordinators, northern Aboriginal Education Boards, and the First Nations Education Steering Committee (a Provincial organization representing all First Nations in British Columbia). We not only asked this

group of stakeholders to review draft copies of our teacher education proposal, we asked for advice before we started writing the proposal.

Meetings were held in the northern communities of Quesnel, Fort St. John, Prince George, Fort St. James, Williams Lake, Prince Rupert, New Aiyansh (Wilp Wilxo'oskwhl Nis ga'a) and Terrace. These meetings were approximately 1 1/2 hours to a half-day in length. In the first set of meetings, the focus was on compiling answers to questions such as:

1. What should be included in a teacher education program?
2. What background should preservice teachers have when they apply to the program?
3. In what location(s) should the program be offered?
4. How should the program be offered?
5. Should there be a separate teacher education program for peoples of Aboriginal decent?
6. What is the best way to manage and evaluate program quality?

Based on the responses to the above questions, as well as information obtained from other stakeholders and the research literature on teacher education (e.g., McConaghy, 2000), the education faculty developed a draft proposal. For example, the results of the collaboration process revealed that the Indigenous communities did not want a separate program for Aboriginal peoples. What was wanted was one program that would treat everyone the same, and that would prepare future teachers to teach all children, not just Indigenous children while at the same time meeting the Provincial standards for teacher certification programs. Therefore, the program design included Aboriginal Education courses that are required for all pre-service teachers. A second outcome of these meetings was the creation of an Aboriginal Education Coordinator's position. This position was created not only to teach courses on Aboriginal education, but also to help with the recruitment and retention of Aboriginal peoples in the new program. The Aboriginal Coordinator will also work with all faculty members to ensure that all courses take into consideration the perspective/cultural knowledge of Indigenous peoples. A third outcome was that a advisory committee should be established that includes

stakeholders from all communities to provide guidance and accountability for the new program.

In the second set of meetings, the actual proposal that had been written was shared, and comments about the proposal were obtained. As with the first set of meetings, the Chair of the Education Program traveled to each community visited in the first round, and again each meeting was between 1 1/2 hours to a half-day in length. At the end of these meetings final adjustments were made to the proposal and it was submitted to UNBC's Senate, accreditations bodies, and funding bodies.

In addition to the challenge related to the vast distances between each community there were other challenges that had to be sensitively dealt with. For example, it was necessary to keep in mind that each community was unique and that there are substantial differences among communities regarding language and culture. It was also important to take into consideration the fact that past colonialism has resulted in mistrust and that trust building was needed. Finally, it was important to be constantly aware of the fact that for Indigenous peoples, the power structures within the university, accreditation, and funding processes still favour the traditional Euro-western based educational designs. Therefore, it was important to listen with an open bicultural mind to what community members were saying.

The final step in the collaborative process will be to establish the recommended advisory committee that will not only provide feedback and advise on the general operations of the program, but also to be actively involved in the evaluation of the program. The purpose of this advisory committee will be to develop a shared sense of responsibility and accountability of the program to the accreditation agencies. It is anticipated that this advisory committee will be formed in the Fall 2002.

Proposal Summary

While the design and structure of UNBC's newly accredited program does not appear to be radically different than teacher education programs offered by other institutions in Canada or the United States, the program does have a number of unique features that resulted from the collaborative process used in its development (The University of Northern British Columbia, 2001). For example, the program has

mandatory Aboriginal Education courses that all pre-service teachers are required to take, and has a community based advisory committee.

The extensive collaboration with the various Indigenous communities surrounding UNBC resulted in a program that was fought for with one voice. That is, when obstacles were presented by the accreditation and funding bodies, UNBC was able to mount political pressure to the extent that even in a time of major Provincial funding cut backs, new money was made available for the implementation of the new program in September 2002. However, there were some things for which the political pressure was not successful. For example, at the secondary level it was hoped that we would be able to use First Nations Studies as a “teachable major” (teachable majors are currently defined as English, mathematics, physics, chemistry, etc), but our request was rejected by the accreditation agency. While UNBC backed off this request for the time being so that the entire program would not be held up, we have made a commitment to continue working with Indigenous communities in negotiating with the accreditation agency to have First Nations Studies as a teachable major. A second goal that was not obtained was to have a second regional campus offering the teacher education program. It was felt that by offering the program at a regional campus this would bring the teacher education program closer to the rural communities. However, the Ministry of Advanced Education, Training, and Technology who funds post-secondary education in British Columbia cited financial issues for not funding a regional offering at this point in time. Again, however, we are collaboratively continuing our negotiations to open such a program in the near future.

In summary the challenge was being able to collaborate while at the same time not losing sight of the current research literature on teacher education, the requirements established by the accreditation and funding agencies, and the vision established for UNBC by its Board of Governors. The purpose of the presentation being proposed is to provide educators with the lessons learned concerning a large-scale collaborative development of a new teacher education program.

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