

The Northern Aboriginal Peer Support Network Program:
Current Practices and Plans for a Generative Curriculum

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Abstract

The Canadian Counselling Association's Ethical Guidelines for Professional Conduct (1994) indicates that the provision of counselling services must consider the cultural perspective of the client who may be seeking help. The Northern Aboriginal Peer Support Network is a bicultural peer counselling program developed as a strategic clinical response to post secondary students attending the First Nations Center at the University of Northern British Columbia. The program was inspired by the work of Honore France and Rod McCormick (1994). This new program offers bicultural peer counselling and service delivery and allows lay counselors and their clients to be immersed within the aboriginal culture and to practise counselling from a medicine wheel perspective. The curriculum also bridges this perspective with western approaches including models brief therapy. This very unique peer counselling curriculum was developed and tailored to the needs of aboriginal and non aboriginal post secondary students in the north. This is a program for students at UNBC who are straddling the issues of biculturalism, new living environments, and numerous daily and historical stresses while making the transition to the post secondary setting. Most importantly, this program has proven that aboriginal and non aboriginal students can work together successfully and constructively in a post secondary setting in the north.

The Northern Aboriginal Peer Support Network Program: Current Practices

According to the Canadian Counselling Association's Ethical Guidelines for Professional Conduct, counselling services should take into consideration the cultural perspective of the client who may be seeking help. The Northern Aboriginal Peer Support Network is a peer counselling and mentorship program. The program was developed as a clinical response to the clinical counselling caseload in the First Nations Center at the University of Northern British Columbia.

The groundwork for this program was developed after careful assessment of caseload demands and the needs of clients combined with the existing strengths of the First Nations student community in the First Nations Center at the University of Northern British Columbia. As it was the observation of the counselors in the Center that informal peer support was being offered by students to students after hours, sometimes in the form of crisis intervention, the program was a response to the requests of students to receive opportunities for skill development in these areas.

For these and other reasons, the development of a peer counselling or mentorship program was a logical intervention to strategically address some of the needs of aboriginal / First Nations students in the Center. The program provided the opportunity to address many of the after hours concerns and needs of students while simultaneously offering a psycho-educational program. By building on the already existing strengths of the First Nations Center student culture at our university, combined with the efforts of our predecessors at other post secondary institutions (E.g. McCormick & France, 1996), this program became a creative option which has supplemented the counselling services offered on campus. It was our vision and hope that by increasing the skill levels of our student community, that we might also eventually increase the communication and problem-solving skills of local communities when our students graduated or returned home to visit.

This program initiative also supported reports by the BC Teacher's Federation at the time which were suggesting that the lack of role models was a key factor in the attrition rate of aboriginal students in educational settings. Other research undertaken has indicated that programs that have included opportunities for mentoring have been successful in helping aboriginal students to overcome barriers with respect to self esteem, confidence and socialization skills (Olds, 2002).

The current UNBC/FNC program was inspired by the work of Honore France and Rod McCormick (1994) who wrote a manual called *The Helping Circle: First Nations' Peer Support Network Training Curriculum* which was last revised in 1996. The resulting Peer Support Network is very different from this pivotal piece, but shares a common theme. Para-professional or "lay" support is offered by mentors who combine brief therapy techniques with experiential cultural traditions and techniques (E.g. Talking circles, story telling, etc.).

The purpose of the Peer Support Network curriculum is to continuously develop strategies for teaching various approaches to begin to apply solution focused brief therapy steps which are then bridged within a medicine wheel perspective. By encouraging and supporting the “helpee” to consider small gradual and incremental steps towards goal setting, combined with the medicine wheel perspective of “balance” to health, our First Nations students have been successful in supporting many of their peers. The peer support volunteers / mentors also report that the training they have received has been beneficial to them in their own personal lives and has helped them to find summer employment and full time jobs after graduation.

Using the methodology described above, a unique peer support counselling curriculum has been developed and tailored to the needs of UNBC students on the Prince George campus. Over the years we are finding that more and more non aboriginal students are learning about the program and are interested in becoming volunteers. In this way, the program has established our First Nations students as leaders in the field of peer support counselling and mentorship on campus. This is a tremendous outcome given that two of the philosophical pillars on which our institution was built are: to serve the peoples of the north, and meet the needs of local aboriginal communities.

One of the strengths of this program is that it has demonstrated that aboriginal and non-aboriginal post secondary students can work together cooperatively and successfully! Examples of these collaborative relationships have come from the cross-cultural one to one personal support and community referrals the students offer one another, anti-racism initiatives (E.g. Workshops have been offered in public schools on topics such as problem-solving and communication, mentorship, anti-racism and anti-bullying, etc.), a community newsletter, and collaboration with other institutions such as the College of New Caledonia on their Youth Mentorship program. It will be interesting to see how our model works on projects such as a radio show for CFUR 88.7 FM which is currently underway. Each of these and other program efforts have served as proactive initiatives which promote community capacity both on and off campus for our students with First Nations students and their peers leading the way..

Presently, the program is supported by the staff at the First Nations Center, the UNBC administration, and the First Nations Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples, together with the aboriginal, non-aboriginal, and indigenous student populations at the University of Northern British Columbia. The program is now entering its third year of operations.

Approximately 45 student volunteers have received the program training over three years. As the program is still in its infancy, it has yet to be evaluated. However the training provided to the peer support counselors and mentors at the annual training retreat was evaluated very favorably each year by the post secondary students who participated in the program. In addition, the results of an external review of the Center last year by an external reviewer indicated that the program is viewed positively by students and staff and that it is important program in developing community capacity.

The PSN 2002-03 Program. We have now recruited sixteen peer support counselors / mentors for the 2002-03 academic year. There was a 36.6% rate of returning peer support counselors this year. Those who did not return either graduated, moved on to other universities to pursue their academic careers, or have personal commitments and part time jobs which interfere with their ability to volunteer. Ten new students were admitted into the program this fall. Eleven of the program volunteers are either First Nations or indigenous to other countries. We may find that the program is also a good model for addressing diversity at the post secondary level.

With the gracious addition of a substantial operating budget from the university administration, there have been some new additions and initiatives undertaken this year. First, we have added an elder to the program. The elder will attend two out of four program meetings with the volunteers held weekly for the purposes of debriefing and ongoing training. Secondly, we have hired a program tutor to provide additional support to the volunteers after regular office hours when the peer counselor supervisor is not available. As our program is continually growing and evolving, we are optimistic that the addition of these two initiatives will help us to hold true to the origins and commitment of the original program which began in September 2000.

Peer Mentorship. We have observed a peer mentor identity that is cultivated by the peer support counselors who volunteer in the program over the course of the academic year. This result is an obvious extension of the leadership role attributed to the peer support counselors. It may also stem from the fact that the peer support counselors as a group view themselves as role models. Combined, the members wear a mentorship hat which is beginning to have a positive effect on campus with all students. The program has evolved into a membership program by following through on the interests of the membership and our community. Two examples emerged by accepting invitations from a local school district counselor to attend two of her schools in order to facilitate playground peer-helper training in two local elementary schools in Prince George.

Funding history. The Peer Support Network was initially funded by a seed grant offered by the Ministry of Advanced Education. After the initial year of operation, the program was funded by the UNBC administration. The goals of the program are to promote aboriginal leadership and cross cultural counselling methodologies on campus. This program aims to reduce racism on campus by combining an inclusive approach, which is fun, exciting to participate in, and which is both inspiring and empowering on a personal level. Additionally, the program aspires to retain aboriginal students, and to increase personal and job related skills by promoting, and valuing students. One of the many outcomes of the program is that volunteers learn to make meaning from their experiences for their own intrinsic knowledge of themselves and others by expanding upon what they have learned from their lives with enriching opportunities for personal and growth on campus.

Future. The vision for the future of the program is to develop a generative curriculum. This means moving into the surrounding local communities to talk to the elders about the

bicultural model that we have developed at UNBC. It will be equally important that we ask the elders what cultural norms and values we should strive to embrace and what strategies are needed to reflect these correctly. This year we have added an elder to the program. The elder will attend weekly meetings twice a month to offer a more traditional perspective. Typically these meetings are facilitated by an educational psychologist and a social worker who collaborate and team up to offer this program. However, perhaps by beginning with the addition of an elder we have made a start towards incorporating aboriginal community knowledge and resources.

The future direction of the program curriculum will be to continue writing and developing it. Eventually, the generative approach to developing more components will be explored and sampled. A similar approach was taken by Zhatie, Naowere Dahhk'e, Yati, Zhuh Gijjik, & Naawo k'e, (1993) who developed a generative curriculum. This latter curriculum designed in collaboration with the Dene Kede of the NWT is an academic curriculum targeted at school aged children between the ages of 6 and 12. Other leaders on the subject of generative curricula have included the First Nations Partnership Programs (2000) operating in the fields of childhood education and youth care programs, and are referred to in the relevant literature by Ball and Pence (1999).

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