RECOGNIZING ABORIGINAL ORAL TRADITION THROUGH BLENDED LEARNING: A SUCCESS STORY

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Abstract. The Aboriginal Health and Community Administration Program (AHCAP) is a certificate program developed through the partnership of the Institute for Aboriginal Health and Continuing Studies at the University of British Columbia. This paper examines factors in the program's blended design and development which have contributed to the exceptionally high completion rate and the strongly positive responses and outcomes for widely diverse learner cohorts. Factors which appear to contribute to the program success include: 1) a holistic approach compatible with traditional Aboriginal oral traditions of teaching and learning; 2) a university partnership that taps into unique networks and capacities; 3) incorporating the 4 R's of Aboriginal education: relevance, reciprocity, respect and responsibility generated throughout the learning and teaching, both online and face-to-face; and 4) making the program accessible to geographically and technologically diverse communities of learners.

1. Blended Program Design for Aboriginal Students: A Holistic Approach

Joanne Archibald, Sto:lo First Nation, currently Dean of Indigenous Education, University of British Columbia, observed:

With the technological advances of video, television and film, our world has become a combined oral/ literate/ visual one. This combination has exciting possibilities for First

> Nations because it is nearing the traditional holistic approach to teaching and learning which is needed to heal our people who have been adversely affected by history. (Archibald, 1990)

The Aboriginal Health and Community Administration Program (AHCAP) is a certificate program designed to increase the capacity of Aboriginal people in British Columbia to deliver health care services, coordinate clinical care, and improve health promotion activities inclusive of Aboriginal medical and community perspectives. In this paper we will examine factors in the program's blended design and development (incorporating face-to-face and online learning) which have contributed to the exceptionally high completion rate and the strongly positive responses and outcomes from each cohort. Students are geographically, academically and culturally diverse. Some have not formally completed Grade 12; some have Master's degrees. Students are also diverse in age, language, work experience, work and community demands, literacy levels, financial resources, objectives in participating, online access, and experience with online work.

Started in 2003 with input from Aboriginal communities throughout British Columbia, the program has been developed and implemented through the partnership of the Institute for Aboriginal Health (IAH) with Continuing Studies (CS) at the University of British Columbia. To date there have been 112 adult students with a completion rate of over 80%. (Some students who have been unable to complete in one year have been able to complete a missing course in the following year). The program includes five courses, each starting with a 3-day residency followed by eight weeks of weekly online assignments and discussions. The majority of students (90%) come from outside the metropolitan area of Vancouver and 36% come from small communities in Northern British Columbia. Some have access to high-speed Internet and some rely on dial-up connections. Distances are significant as British Columbia has an area of 944,735 square kilometres, almost equivalent to the area of California, Oregon and Washington states combined. Enrolment is open to students with very different levels of high-school and post-secondary education, thus acknowledging the value of a wide scope of real life experience. Those who have more formal education benefit from the stories provided by those whose experience is more connected to communities.

2. Background on Aboriginal Communities and Aboriginal Learners in Canada

Aboriginal peoples is a collective name for all of the original peoples of Canada and their descendants. The Canadian Constitution Act of 1982 describes the Aboriginal Peoples in Canada as three distinct peoples: Indians [commonly referred to as First Nations], Inuit and Métis. These three distinct peoples have unique histories, languages, social systems. More than one million of the 33 million people in Canada identify themselves as Aboriginal, according to the 2006 Census, and many other Aboriginal Canadians are not counted as Aboriginal in the official census.

Aboriginal communities may be in areas hundreds of kilometres from the nearest city; however, half of the Aboriginal population reside in urban centres. Children growing up in remote communities or in urban areas face a number of barriers to

participation in post-secondary education: funding and transportation costs, the legacy of residential schools[1], institutions which do not reflect Aboriginal culture and values, huge geographical and cultural distances from health care services, and educational systems which are incompatible with Aboriginal values, knowledge, experience and communication approaches. Increasingly Aboriginal peoples have found ways to bridge these barriers to access post-secondary education (10 Aboriginal people participated in higher education programs in 1952 compared with over 30,000 in 2006).

Although Aboriginal people make up approximately 5% of the Canadian population, their representation in post-secondary institutions is far from equitable as less than 1% of post-secondary students are Aboriginal (Statistics Canada 2009). Less than 56% of Aboriginal youth complete high school and of those who do, few have the grade point average or course prerequisites required for university admission. Aboriginal educators and Aboriginal organizations have been researching this situation for more than thirty years. Feedback from the communities indicates that students have higher success rates when there are Aboriginal instructors teaching Aboriginal-derived curricula. Aboriginal-derived curriculum reflects learners' distinct cultures and contributions in history and incorporates teaching methodology that places a higher value on community achievement and equality in the learning process than is generally encountered in traditional western systems of education, tend to feature competition and individual achievement.

3.   Significant Factors in Program Design, Development and Implementation

Factors which appear to contribute to the program success include: 1) a holistic approach compatible with traditional Aboriginal oral traditions of teaching and learning; 2) a university partnership that taps into unique networks and capacities; 3) incorporating the 4 R's of aboriginal education: relevance, reciprocity, respect and responsibility generated throughout the learning and teaching, both online and face-to-face; and 4) making the program accessible to geographically and technologically diverse communities of learners.

3.1   HOLISTIC APPROACH COMPATIBLE WITH ORAL TRADITIONS OF EDUCATION AND LEARNING

The format of the five courses within the certificate program, both the face-to-face segments, including the talking circles, and the online segments, is compatible with oral traditions. Assignments and discussions involve presenting and sharing stories, drawing

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[1] Starting in the 19th century Canadian Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their families to attend residential schools with the intention of forcing Aboriginal assimilation into European-Canadian society. Children were forbidden to speak their mother tongue or to follow their cultural beliefs and frequently endured physical or sexual abuse. Some of the schools continued to exist as late as the 1990s. Since the mid 2000s the Indian Residential School Survivors Society and the Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada has strived to address the multigenerational effects of Canadian residential schools.

upon each student's experience and insight. Beyond the academic, careful attention is paid to transitions of beginnings and endings of the face-to-face seminar days. For example at the start of each seminar morning and the end of each seminar day there is time for checking in with each participant. This involves hearing without interruption from each person around the circle whatever is important for him or her to present to the group.

The program demands a rigorous weekly schedule of readings, assignments and discussion postings. Students support and encourage each other through this process. There is a linking of the academic content from one course to another, and opportunities during each new residency to revisit and receive feedback from students on the previous course. Social networking is provided (through Facebook) for graduates to continue to share stories and issues, achievements and concerns when their online course time together is finished. The online support is crucial for keeping students and instructors on track. It is also an effective forum for building a strong network of supportive colleagues. Student comments reflect their comfort with the discussion forum:

Examples of messages posted to the online 'Café'

> I am sending this note to say a huge thanks for your encouraging support! Fortunately, I am tough! I am going to hang in here "one course at a time" besides that my own band is going through an election process and the next council may not approve the funding for this program for the next person…Besides that, I cannot look people in the eye knowing that I bailed out (pride) and finally I don't want to ruin it for the next student coming after me.

Examples of posted reflections on the online interaction:

> What an awesome course, when I first started this course I was terrified, but everyone made me feel so comfortable and welcomed, sometimes I would be thinking a question and before you knew it someone answered it.

> [The instructor's] enthusiasm and her quickness in responding on-line, you knew right away if your answer was way off base, so you could go back over material and correct your perception.

> I gleaned a lot of knowledge from my classmates. Hearing about their communities, the problems encountered, the solutions applied and the similarities in values and traditions was very enlightening.

> I loved the challenge the course put before me. I learned more about my classmates from the feedbacks and café and greeting comments.

> Good to read everyone's posts and responses. Lots of different interpretations of what was read each week so lots of things to think about....All put together it has given me much more knowledge, understanding, courage to make changes and confidence in some of the work we do.

The program has developed a particular culture in the format of the residency days and the online informality (Chase, M., Macfadyen, L., Reeder, K., and Roche, J. 2002). Each cohort develops particular patterns and roles; different individuals take on the role

of keeping the communication going and providing support and encouragement to those who have encountered community or personal difficulties that make it challenging to complete an assignment on schedule. Many of the AHCAP students are familiar with web-based interfaces like Facebook and chat functions like Messenger, and they model this skill for others who are less familiar or who are without constant Internet access.

3.2 A UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIP THAT TAPS INTO UNIQUE NETWORKS AND CAPACITIES

The partnership between the Institute for Aboriginal Health and Continuing Studies in the creation and implementation of the AHCAP program has provided information, skills, technical systems, and community networks critical to the program success. Over the years of offering the AHCAP program, the roles and responsibilities of the partner units, instructors and administrators have become more clearly defined. The Institute for Aboriginal Health has expertise regarding Aboriginal research and community protocols, Aboriginal health care, pedagogy and curriculum development. The Institute maintains and nurtures essential relationships with Aboriginal communities, potential students, organizations and instructors. Continuing Studies Centre for Intercultural Communication has well-developed systems for course implementation, blended program design, and ongoing student and instructor support for diverse groups. The design is flexible with attention paid to developing interests of the cohort, through adding a site visit, a speaker, or a hands-on activity to the three-day seminar sessions

Instructor selection and support is a joint process with IAH recruiting and identifying candidates, and IAH and CS staff interviewing jointly and coming to an agreement on the final selection. Instructor competencies required include: subject matter expertise, knowledge of adult education and Aboriginal pedagogy, values and world view as well as previous teaching experience and computer skills. IAH and CS coach instructors in matching the content and their teaching style to the particular needs of the group, both face-to-face and online. Instructors need to be embedded in Aboriginal community; they play a role in connecting the university to community members. Instructors are encouraged to facilitate online conversation, balancing support and challenge in responses to each student, and encouraging a critical approach to the subject.

The course structure permits flexibility when necessary which requires collaboration with the two partner units at the university. Students generally have very demanding and complex community responsibilities and unexpected events make it necessary to develop new program policies and adjustments to accommodate individual difficulties which arise. This process involves input from both the Institute for Aboriginal Health and Continuing Studies. In several instances emergencies have prevented a student from attending the face-to-face session (fog, blizzard, mudslides) or a student has fallen behind online (deaths in the community, health emergencies). In these cases we have been able to provide alternative completion schedules that enabled them to complete all course requirements and graduate with their cohort.

3.3   INCORPORATING THE 4 R'S OF ABORIGINAL EDUCATION

The development of AHCAP has been guided by the values of the 4 R's of Aboriginal Education (Kirkness and Barnhardt 1991): respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility. Each of these elements has been addressed in the implementation and ongoing modification of the AHCAP program. Admission is based on experience as much as levels of formal education. Courses are taught by Aboriginal instructors with personal knowledge and values honed by growing up, living and working in Aboriginal communities.

Communities have been consulted from the inception of the program and in the ongoing development. Urban and rural communities throughout British Columbia are consulted and are involved in the implementation of the AHCAP program by providing input, financial support and in some cases technical support, as well as by attending and participating in graduation celebrations. Students bring knowledge of their communities and the realities of community health care services to the program. Throughout the course they demonstrate a sense of responsibility to contribute to each discussion and are motivated to exchange shared or unique experiences, difficulties and solutions, often inspired by finding common challenges and exploring potential resources and services and policy development together.

The blended design provides ongoing opportunities for students to establish confidence and trust with each other when meeting face to face during the three-day residency seminars. Aboriginal teaching styles (featuring story-telling and the sharing of personal experience) and the talking circle format are critical to the success of these residencies. The online work makes it possible to do the certificate without leaving families or communities for long periods. It also creates a new community of support removed from the learners' immediate communities.

> One Student's Story: Anna (protected identity), a healthcare leader from a rural community, arrived at the first residency of the program and felt comfortable enough after the first day to share her story with the group. She said, "I hate reading. The words on the page are small and hard to see and the process makes me feel like running away." She described being admitted to a university in British Columbia a number of years ago, arriving the first week, being handed her economics text, opening the text, taking a look at the first pages, struggling with the amount of dense text on each page, closing the book, and leaving the campus never to return until arriving for the first AHCAP residency. Anna explained that she was feeling very uneasy about stepping onto the UBC campus, starting the program, and facing a volume of required readings. At the end of the residency Anna had spent three days connecting with her cohort and said that her comfort and confidence had increased.
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> From the outset of the admissions process, based on her required letter of intent, there had been concern that Anna might not have the literacy levels necessary to succeed,. However, once the online discussions and assignments began, she contributed her extensive experience and insights clearly and forcefully, effectively engaging with the interactive format of sharing experience and insights. As the Assignments are designed to draw directly upon their community work and insights, Anna completed her written assignments very successfully with increasing confidence. The activities of the first residency provided many opportunities for her to exchange with other students, to get to know instructors, to practice with the online platform, and to participate in interactive

sessions including "reading without reading" (how to tap into your previous knowledge and read selectively).

Anna said the best parts of the residency were being able to meet in a circle and get to know each other and discovering "that it isn't cheating or being lazy not to read the whole article." She also discovered that she already knew much of what was included in the articles.

3.4 TECHNOLOGY CHOICES

3.4.1 Making the Program Accessible to Geographically and Technologically Diverse Communities of Learners

In designing and developing the AHCAP program a conscious decision was made, based on input from communities and the two partner units, to use only the discussion board function of the online learning management system. All of the course content is delivered through the three-day residency seminars followed up by readings provided in hard copy, along with the discussion questions, also provided in hard copy. The learners may have basic dial-up connections and therefore might not be able to access applications requiring a higher bandwidth. Limiting the online tools to the discussion board has been a factor in making the program accessible to the geographically and technologically diverse community of learners.

Learners with a wide range of experience in using the Internet, with or without consistent access to Internet, adapt quickly to the discussion forum and are assisted by those who are familiar with web-based interfaces. Time is allotted during the first residency for computer practice in the online learning management system. Throughout the online course, a 'practice' discussion room is available for experimenting and playing with postings.

3.4.2 The Essential Role of the Course Moderator

When working with the first student cohort and first group of instructors in 2003, it became clear that students found it unsettling when different instructors for different courses required very different patterns of assignments and had very different ideas of how to be present online. Some instructors had extensive experience with online instruction and some were new to the process. As a result a position was created for a senior instructor / administrator / course moderator to have the ongoing role of communicating with students throughout each eight-week online course component, and working closely with instructors before each course, as well as online, to ensure a consistent pattern and rhythm throughout the five courses. The moderator checks in with students and instructors regularly and is available to address questions, technical problems or challenges in scheduling, assignment feedback, etc. for individual learners.

Hey S, I think we all miss the group it was such an uplifting time to be with such great company, and we can still keep chatting thanks to [moderator]. Take care J

Working on-line works well for me and having the patient and understanding from my instructor as I had a very rough 2 months. I barely made it through, but managed because of the understanding of my situation.

3.4.3 AHCAP and Critical Success Factors Identified by First Nations ICT Capacity Building Think Tank

In 2007, a First Nations ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) Capacity Building Think Tank, held in Vancouver, brought together a group of educators, technicians and former students to review results and lessons learned from a recently completed pilot project for training Network technicians for Aboriginal communities and to share findings from other Aboriginal training initiatives. The aim of the think tank was to achieve consensus on a preferred model to be recommended to the First Nations Technology Council. One of the models they examined was the AHCAP model. Critical success factors they identified parallel elements incorporated in the AHCAP program:

- community involvement in the planning and implementation of capacity building with community leaders participating as advocates and active supporters of capacity building in the community.
- building on what's already in the community -- community skills, existing infrastructure, existing learning methodologies, other service and support initiatives, etc.
- planning, scheduling and delivering the program in a community-relevant and culturally sensitive manner.
- maintaining community feedback loops at each stage of planning and implementation - listening carefully and responding to feedback.

4.   In Conclusion

The AHCAP program model makes it possible to recognize and develop the knowledge and leadership skills of students with widely diverse levels of formal education and experience. The design of the online and face-to-face components resonates with the oral traditions of Aboriginal students and instructors. The partnership of the Institute for Aboriginal Health and Continuing Studies combines Aboriginal networks and community input with course design and implementation experience. Incorporating the 4 R's of Aboriginal education and learning systems makes the program relevant, respectful and accessible to Aboriginal participants from diverse backgrounds. The outcome of a very high completion rate of over 80% in the six years of the program indicates that the combination of paper-based texts and face-to-face residencies with discussion platforms works well for program participants. The authors believe AHCAP is a model with potential for wider applications in the development of educational programs for other Aboriginal learners and other diverse communities of learners. The spirit of the course is described in the following note posted on the discussion board by one of our first graduates, to welcome the second cohort:

Welcome to the 2004-2005 AHCAP students.

Many of you are probably looking around at each other; some people you may know or you may not know a soul. Look at the person beside you and smile, introduce yourself, …Well done, you have just met one of the many people who will be a part of your support team for this school year. I encourage you to take the time to get to know each

other, as you will rely on each other for wisdom and encouragement for academics or private reasons, inside or outside of the classroom.

Do not feel overwhelmed by the homework load and your regular day-to-day work activities. You have a great team of educators who are very flexible and understanding, their role may seem simple as giving you homework but really it is more than that. They will take you to higher level of education by drawing out your inner thoughts and ideas and encouraging you to put this into your work. Do not feel afraid to approach your teacher or S (moderator) for further support or clarification of the homework pieces. As I have learned that the only stupid question you could ask, is the one that you did not ask.

I will leave on this note, "Go, learn, laugh, enjoy and be proud of yourselves, as you have taken the first step of this journey. This journey may feel hard but the rewards at the end are the best. If you get nothing out of this course, just remember the new friends that you have made here at UBC. Wyai,

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