Removing Barriers to Online Learning:
A Learning Journey

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INTRODUCTION

On the surface, a research project focused on how to better support Indigenous learners in rural and remote communities may be perceived as a simple and appropriate inquiry. Access to education should be part of the social contract that all individuals living Canada can expect, regardless of their location in the country. We know, however, this is not necessarily the case, especially for Indigenous populations. Several specific calls to action in the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) highlight this reality and reflect the impact of lack of access to education on the ability of Indigenous individuals to achieve the level of personal, social, and economic success they are entitled to as citizens of modern Canada.

Like so much research, however, the search for an answer to a question or the resolution to a problem leads to the discovery, or perhaps revelation, of truths not previously considered. It is these truths that often turn out to be at the heart of the issue under investigation.

I undertook this research thinking I would gain knowledge of local history and clarity of the current context — that I would come to better understand the needs of adult learners in a rural and remote Indigenous community and the barriers that inhibit having those needs met.

Despite the research project not being completed as anticipated, the findings mirror others' research efforts as far as identifying systemic, social, geographical, and financial barriers for Indigenous learners in rural and remote communities. The history that created the systems that lead to inequalities has not changed, so the result here is simply more evidence of known truths.

I was hopeful, perhaps naively so, that unveiling these truths in a Canada that I perceived as more willing to engage in difficult conversations and take decisive actions would result in tangible change, at least in one community. And it might. But I do not think it will — yet. The conversations that will create change are not happening. In my very limited experience, specifically in the context of this research, I do not see evidence — from anyone — of the level of engagement necessary to facilitate change.

This leads me to the underlying and perhaps more significant truths of this research effort. My non-Indigenous voice is not the right voice to be leading conversations on the needs of Indigenous learners. My place of influence as a leader in post-secondary education demands I use that privilege to advance the voices of Indigenous learners and their community leaders. I do not know the culturally appropriate approach to engaging Indigenous individuals in conversations about their educational needs, and I need to understand and overcome my hesitation to learn how to do better for Indigenous learners and their communities.

Conducting this research has taken me on a journey of reflection and learning about myself. I hope it opens the door to further conversation with teaching and learning peers, Indigenous colleagues, and Indigenous communities.

CONTEXT

The College of New Caledonia (CNC) has six campuses that serve northern interior BC, including 22 First Nations communities. To ensure students have access to courses and programs, CNC offers face-to-face classes, digital delivery instruction (DDI), and online options (blended and fully online).

In fall 2019, CNC initiated a project with Cheslatta Carrier Nation to support learning for students in that community who had been previously unable to access DDI courses. Members of the Cheslatta Carrier Nation are based at Southbank, on the south shore of Francois Lake, 23 kilometres south of Burns Lake. They have eight

reserves on 1,400 hectares, with all reserves located at least five kilometres apart. DDI courses occur in real time, with an instructor at one campus site delivering a class to learners on that site and to others who join the class remotely through a video-conferencing setup in a classroom at another campus site. The technological infrastructure and equipment for DDI in Cheslatta were installed at the Cheslatta Education Centre over the fall 2019 term and ready for use in the spring 2020 term.

The focus of the Cheslatta project is on infrastructure and instructional supports to ensure the community has both the equipment and the technological support for a clear and consistent connection for DDI sessions. Other research has highlighted the need for government funding to build the capacity and infrastructure needed to support DDI programs in rural and remote Indigenous communities (AFN 2010c; Ambler 2004; Carpenter 2010; Downing 2002; First Nations Technology Council 2006; McMahon, O'Donnell, Smith, Woodman Simmonds, & Walmark 2010; O'Donnell, Milliken, Chong, & Walmark 2010; Perley & O'Donnell 2006; Whiteduck, Burton, Whiteduck, & Beaton, 2010), and this effort acknowledges that need.

Although CNC has DDI capacity at all its campuses, the Cheslatta project is the first instance in which CNC planned to transmit to and from an external site, the Cheslatta Education Centre, for teaching and learning.

A research project at the Centre for Teaching & Learning (CTL) at CNC supported the Cheslatta project. We worked with the community to identify how they want to use DDI and the information, learning, and support that users of DDI need to ensure their success.

Research indicates that remote First Nations across Canada face considerable challenges and opportunities related to adult learning and quality education and training programs for local citizens (Beaton & Carpenter, 2014). Although providing access to education through DDI is a significant step, it is insufficient. Findings by McMullen and Rohrbach (2003) on best practices for development and delivery of distance education courses for remote First Nations identified the involvement of on-site tutors, flexible delivery models, and the need to develop personal relationships between the students and instructors as key to success (Simon et al., 2014). Recommendations arising from Davis's (2000) assessment of distance education in Canadian Aboriginal communities recognized that First Nations communities should have control over the distance education content and delivery of courses in their communities; they need to define their own educational priorities and determine the values and perspectives informed by their educational experiences.

Information and communication technologies (ICT) offer new formal and informal learning and education opportunities. The use of ICT in remote First Nations is changing how individuals create and share their experiences and teachings with others (Beaton &Carpenter, 2014). As learning scenarios change and develop, a stronger emphasis on the context of learning is becoming a clear focus (Teixeira, Szűcs, & Mázár, 2016).

The CTL's research project considered the context of learning in the Cheslatta Carrier Nation. The focus on providing the pedagogical framework and support to ensure students in Cheslatta have success with DDI was a natural and necessary extension of the work to provide the infrastructure. It was intended that the lessons learned from this initial DDI offering would inform both CNC and the Cheslatta community as DDI and online offerings are expanded in Cheslatta and other remote communities.

The goals of this research were as follows:
- Determine the community supports that exist or are needed to support students in a DDI or online learning environment.
- Identify the training and support students need to use technology for learning in a DDI setting.
- Discover how and why students can engage in meaningful learning experiences in a DDI setting.
- Identify barriers to students' ability to engage in meaningful learning experiences in a DDI setting.
- Identify knowledge and skills students and instructors use in DDI that could be applied to online course offerings.
- Identify gaps in infrastructure that inhibit students' ability to engage in meaningful learning.

RESEARCH APPROACH

The research approach was appreciative inquiry (AI), a strengths-based, positive approach to organizational change and development. The premise of AI is that "every human system has something that works right — things that give it life when it is vital, effective, and successful. AI begins by identifying this positive core and connecting to it in ways that heighten energy, sharpen vision, and inspire action for change" (Centre for Appreciative Inquiry, n.d.).

The students (or potential students) who are members of the Cheslatta Carrier Nation have insight into what helps them succeed in a learning environment. AI recognizes and respects that knowledge and experience, and it opens the possibility for new ways of thinking when trying to address a need.

To understand what the members of the Cheslatta Carrier Nation might need to be successful in the new learning environment of DDI, the AI was to explore what factors allowed those learners to be successful in other contexts. AI sessions give participants time to think and write responses, but they are also facilitated oral sessions where participants share freely and equally. A co-facilitator captures the verbal responses in writing.

The AI questions were as follows:
1. Describe a time when you were excited about, engaged in, and feeling good about learning (in any context at any age).
2. What made learning possible for you in that situation?
3. What did you value about the learning opportunity you had at that time?
4. What wishes do you have for learning in your community now (particularly here at the Education and Training Centre)?

In addition to the AI questions, two other specific questions were developed:
5. Which courses might be a good option for DDI?
6. What barriers to learning do students in Cheslatta face?

CTL collaborated with the Cheslatta Education and Training Centre, whose director at the time advertised the sessions, encouraged participation from community (band) members, and provided catering for the sessions. The original plan to engage members in the AI process included holding a lunchtime session and an evening session, both scheduled for the same day, September 24, 2019. We hoped to attract 15–30 participants for each session.

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE: PLANNING AND EXECUTION

The research team from CNC included me (Director, Teaching & Learning at CNC) and one staff member from the CTL who has the joint responsibility of managing DDI and conducting focus groups as part of course and term reviews. As the director and project lead, I led the session; the CTL staff member recorded notes.

The Director, Aboriginal Education at CNC offered me some guidance on how to approach the research and recommended the then director of the Cheslatta Education and Training Centre as my contact in the community. To plan the focus group sessions, I travelled from Prince George to Burns Lake to meet with the director from Cheslatta to outline the research goals and establish a collaborative partnership. It was important that the community saw my interest in this project as genuine and respectful. I was there to learn from them and to ensure their voices informed and shaped future planning around DDI and the courses that would be offered through that medium.

Through subsequent telephone meetings, the Cheslatta director and I determined the communication plan to potential participants, the best time to hold the sessions, and the protocols for engagement with participants. I created the communication messages and posters; the Cheslatta director agreed to recruit participants through personal communication, social media, and posters in the Cheslatta Education and Training Centre. As I had funding for transportation and catering, I was able to offer that as an incentive to ensure as much participation as

possible by eligible members of the Cheslatta community. Eligible participants were any members of the Cheslatta Carrier Nation aged 16 years or older who would meet the requirements to take a course (credit or non-credit) offered by CNC.

At this early stage, I was excited about the project. I was proud of myself for taking the initiative to apply for the funding and plan a project I knew would be useful for my institution and meaningful to the Cheslatta community. As a relative newcomer to BC, I was learning about the North, its people, the potential for educational initiatives to positively impact development, and my own place in the educational landscape. I understood that establishing and building relationships was particularly important when collaborating with First Nations, and I felt I had made a good start.

The initial AI session was on September 24, 2019, at the Cheslatta Education and Training Centre. We held it over the lunch hour and provided soup, sandwiches, and sweets. Although I was hopeful that a large number of people would attend, only seven participants turned up. Of those, only two were members of the Cheslatta Carrier Nation. One other participant was from another First Nation in BC; the others were not Indigenous. However, regardless of ethnicity, all participants lived in the Cheslatta community.

Rather than put off the conversation, my CTL colleague and I recognized that the community members who had shown up, regardless of whether they were members of the Cheslatta Carrier Nation, could add value to our project. At the very least, it would help establish our relationship with the community. We did not indicate to any participants that our intention had been to hear only from members of the Cheslatta Carrier Nation.

The conversation with this group offered both insight and heartbreak. While individuals' personal experiences varied, themes of excitement and hope for the difference education can make in life were tempered by stories of frustration that circumstances of money, family, or access prevented that hope from being realized.

Although this group of participants was small, their willingness to be so open and frank about their experiences fueled my anticipation for the session planned that evening. The participants expressed gratitude for being invited to the conversation. They seemed excited to tell their friends and family about the opportunity to share their stories and wishes in the evening session. I had high hopes for a greater turnout that would include more of our target participants. We were disappointed when no one showed up for the evening session.

On reflection and further discussion with director of the Cheslatta Education and Training Centre, we concluded that the communication, timing, and lack of appropriate or sufficient incentives explained the low turnout. We decided to try again.

I created new communications messages and received permission to use some of the research funding to provide compensation of $25 grocery cards to participants; transportation and catering were also in place. The director in Cheslatta delivered targeted messaging to two specific groups in the community: separate groups of men and women who I understood to be exclusively Indigenous. Each group had approximately 50 members. It was not clear whether these groups had received our invitation to the initial research sessions, but my impression was they had not.

On October 21, 2019, my CTL colleague and I again travelled from Prince George to the Cheslatta Education and Training Centre. We highly anticipated a robust conversation with a significant number of participants.

This session, also held over lunch, had six participants, all of whom were members of the Cheslatta Carrier Nation. Although we had representatives from our target group, we were nevertheless disappointed by the low turnout.

Like the first group, these participants expressed appreciation for the value of education but recognized as well the barriers to success of poor infrastructure and community issues (conflicts, cultural demands, weather). I was once again humbled by the willingness of strangers to share their stories and ideas.

RESEARCH INTERRUPTED

With winter approaching and my willingness to drive the 250 kilometres from Prince George to Cheslatta in unpredictable weather reduced to zero, I did not know what next steps would be useful in this research effort. This was compounded by news that the director of the Cheslatta Education and Training Centre, with whom I had been collaborating, had left the position. A replacement was not expected until the new year. I felt the small inroad I had made into gaining any trust or credibility in the community was lost.

As it turned out, the new director was a member of the Cheslatta Carrier Nation who had participated in our first session in September. I was so relieved and excited! This individual had been such a strong voice in the focus group, and we had already established a relationship, so I anticipated an easy transition to working with a new collaborator.

I made initial contact in February 2020, soon after the individual started in the director role. We talked about the research and some possible next steps. We agreed that perhaps developing a survey that they would administer would help us gather information that could inform the further development and implementation of the DDI project.

I made several attempts through phone calls and email to follow up on this plan, but I was not able to connect again with the director. I asked the Director of Aboriginal Education at CNC for some assistance so I could be sure that I had the correct person, the right contact information, and confirmation that the director was fine.

The individual was fine, but just as I thought we might continue the project, our usual routines were disrupted as the COVID-19 pandemic hit. For many, this meant a halt to work activities. That was not the case for individuals supporting faculty who had to make the unexpected pivot to online delivery of classes. The workload at the CTL increased exponentially and continues to be demanding as we make plans for a still-unknown scenario this fall.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Despite the limitations of this research effort, it provided value. The stories and experiences the participants shared reflect a deep-rooted appreciation for education and an optimism that it can be an agent of change and success. There was a consistent reflection that education was encouraged by family and community elders, that it was valued and necessary. When participants spoke of their successes in education, they were most often tied to experiences that allowed them to not only learn valued information or skills but also do so in a safe, nurturing, communal environment. Feeling valued and supported and having the opportunity to share the experience with others gave them confidence and inspired continued learning.

For the participants in this research, notions of education focused on the very practical. Whether a personal or professional endeavor, the point of education was to meet a specific need: skill development or job readiness. Identified preferences for courses participants hoped would be available through DDI included accounting for tax purposes, academic upgrading, language classes, tutor training, and mental health and anxiety education. Participants expressed a keen interest in other courses that might be delivered more effectively through a non-DDI medium, such as first aid, WHMIS, gun safety, basic auto maintenance, and any that focus on the geography and history of the land.

None of the participants had experience with DDI as a mode of delivery; nevertheless, in a general sense, they echoed the findings in other research on distance learning, even if DDI was not the specific mode of distance delivery examined.

In this research project, participants expressed value for education, but they were also frustrated that the kinds of courses available to them in the current model of offerings do not meet their needs. This echoes the findings of a

study in an unpublished master's thesis by Johnston (2001) that examined the experiences of six Indigenous women in remote and rural communities completing a full-time teacher assistant program via computer-based distance learning. Among the many findings, Johnston (2001) learned that for the participants to be successful in their courses, the program needed to be flexible and responsive to the unique needs of the students while fostering and nurturing relationships among students and instructors. Another study by Fahy and colleagues (2009) examined the experiences and preferences of 165 residents of four northern and remote communities in Alberta in relation to digital delivery formats. The researchers found that distance education programs need to respond to the preferences and requirements of students rather than obliging them to fit into predetermined delivery models.

The participants in Cheslatta also identified larger issues, such as lack of infrastructure, as barriers to accessing or participating in formal learning. The Cheslatta Education and Training Centre has computers for students, but the internet service is weak and unreliable. For DDI service, CNC installed the equipment and an internet "boost" that would ensure connectivity, but in the longer term it is not clear what the arrangement or cost would be. Participants in our research referenced lack of hardware, lack of computer skills, and the prohibitive cost of reliable internet as barriers to distance learning at home. DDI, a distance learning opportunity offered in a single supported location, was a welcomed initiative.

The need for government funding to build the capacity and infrastructure to support DDI programs in rural and remote Indigenous communities, including sufficient funds for training in information and communication technologies, has been well documented (AFN 2010c; Ambler 2004; Carpenter 2010; Downing 2002; First Nations Technology Council 2006; McMahon, O'Donnell, Smith, Woodman Simmonds, & Walmark 2010; O'Donnell, Milliken, Chong, & Walmark 2010; Perley & O'Donnell 2006; Whiteduck, Burton, Whiteduck, & Beaton, 2010). Cheslatta is no exception to that need. The BC First Nations Technology Council is working to fulfill its vision that the province's First Nations have full and equitable access to the tools, training, and support to maximize the opportunities presented by technology and innovation (First Nations Technology Council, n.d.), but not every community – including Cheslatta — is there yet.

In Cheslatta, beyond barriers that might be solved with sufficient funding and strategic planning, the research participants referenced lack of transportation and other community realities such as cultural expectations and community conflicts as obstacles to learning within the current structure. As one participant put it, "There is always something happening on a reserve… it can be last minute, but you have to go. Everything else can wait." Others gave examples such as childcare commitments, hospital vigils, and funerals as responsibilities that came ahead of schooling at any level. One young man told his story of missing out on a lucrative employment opportunity. The required driving course and test as a condition of employment fell on a day when he was asked by an elder to help dig a grave. His acceptance of that reality reflected the group's resignation to the inflexibility of education providers.

Core to the conversation in Cheslatta was the need to include the community in any planning or discussion on course development and delivery. Both focus groups referenced specific needs for education and training in dealing with mental health issues, and they identified specific opportunities for youth and older adults to be trained as formal tutors and mentors. Participants also expressed a desire for courses on traditional and land-based medicines, Carrier language, and history of the territory. Participants saw DDI as a way to make broader offerings more available and accessible to the community, although there was some hesitation about what participating in a class that essentially has students on camera might really feel like. Orientation to the learning environment and developing a relationship with the instructor were deemed necessary.

The experiences and realities of education planning and delivery in Cheslatta are not unique. The process for designing and thinking about educational delivery models and associated supports should involve genuine partnerships with Indigenous nations to consider students' preferences for programming. The need for respect of cultural sensitivity and familiarity with Indigenous traditions and realities in the community has been repeatedly documented (Dumbrill & Green 2007; Fahy, Steel, & Martin 2009; Greenall & Loizides 2001; Hick 2008; Johnston 2001; Keast 1995; McMullen & Rorhbach 2003; O'Donnell, Walmark, & Hancock 2010; Russell et al. 2005; Russell et al. 2007; Sharpe 1992; Simon et al. 2014; Sisco, 2010). Research has also highlighted the need for flexible and

diverse programs that foster and nurture relationships (Johnston 2001; McMullen & Rorhbach, 2003) The real question is no longer what needs to be done to plan, develop, and support education in Indigenous communities, but rather what are the obstacles that prevent leaders – both Indigenous and non-Indigenous – from ensuring it happens.

REFLECTION ON LEARNING

I began this research journey with presumptions I have at the beginning of most work: amazing things are possible; I can influence and lead change successfully; other people's talents, skills, and experiences will be key to success; and I will learn something important. As is also usually the case, these presumptions turned out to be true but not in the ways I had imagined. Although the premise of the research was straightforward, and solutions for supporting Indigenous learners in rural and remote communities with DDI technology are very possible, the research conversations revealed significant truths that will have value as I continue my learning journey. My experience was specific to a few individuals from one Indigenous community, but I will not limit applying my learning from that experience to broader contexts.

As has been the case with other facilitated sessions I have led, I was honoured and humbled by the willingness of participants to share their personal experiences and reveal their vulnerabilities. I pride myself on a warm and authentic approach that inspires trust as a solid foundation to relationships. My time in Cheslatta was the first opportunity I had to work directly with an Indigenous community, and I was pleased to think I had been accepted. The few hours I spent with the participants were comfortable, engaging, and useful to my intended research purpose. But – there must be a but – I wondered why so few people opted to join the conversation.

Through conversations with others who have more experience working with Indigenous communities, I have come to realize that establishing a working relationship in the moment in Cheslatta was insufficient. I needed a relationship that was recognized by the community either because it was endorsed by elders and other leaders or because it was credibly established over a significant period. Preferably both. This is foundational to the "nothing about us without us" tenet for collaborating with Indigenous communities that I very much respect. How did I miss it?

Of course, my cultural blinders were in the way. That much is obvious. Less obvious, perhaps, are the limitations of my knowledge and my (unusual) lack of confidence in approaching the unknown. I do not know the way into a relationship with an Indigenous community. I do not who to approach or how to do it. I am uncomfortable that my effort could be interpreted as disingenuous and self-serving—that my effort *is* disingenuous and self-serving. I am becoming ever more aware of the Indigenous and settler histories in Canada, and I feel a responsibility to do better. I need help to do so.

Even if I do better, though, that will not position me as a leading voice in the plan for education, or anything else, in Indigenous communities. I can be an ally and an advocate but not the leader. I must be prepared to be a true ally or advocate and support the vision of any Indigenous communities, accepting that it may not align with my own cultural norms or preferences. Additionally, as a leader with a voice and influence in my community, I must create the space for and participate in conversation, investigation, partnership, and reflection with my peers and with Indigenous communities.

Questions remain, and more work remains to be done. These truths hold true: amazing things are possible. We can influence and lead change successfully. All people's talents, skills, and experiences will be key to success. We will learn something important.

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