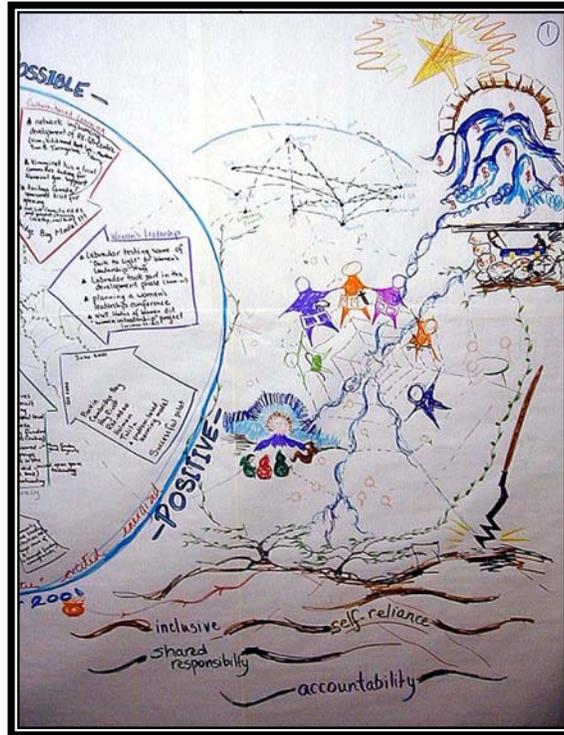# Tools for Community Building

Using a participatory framework to enhance community capacity

An action research report by:

Project Team

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... the object is not to "do things" to or for other people, but rather to foster the capacity of people to do more for themselves. This involves respecting the knowledge and experience that already exist in the community, and using and expanding that knowledge and experience as the bases (sic) for development.
(Spronk, 1994, p. 11).

Since the first (distance) Management Training Programme, our Board has come a long way. We've established a Community Centre at our housing complex and have written several project proposals which have all been approved for funding. That, as far as I'm concerned, is because during the Management Training Program I acquired a lot of the needed skills ... but probably even more importantly, we were encouraged to collaborate with others.
(Maxine Budgell, Happy Valley – Goose Bay, Labrador, 1998).

A living inquiry, as comfortable in the kitchen as in the seminar room, attempts to bring research home, to be named and recognized in the same way we continue to lobby for recognition of unpaid labour, for the value of the story beside the statistic. It is work of the heart, the hands, our sensemaking body, our many-toned voices.
(Neilsen, 1998, p. 205).

Introduction

> *… research is not simply a matter of representing, reflecting or reporting the world but of 'creating' it (Usher, 1993, p. 102).*

The following report is the result of a nine-month action research project called "A Participatory Framework for Enhancing Community Capacity" that was carried out between September 1999 and December 2000. This project gave the NWT and Nunavut Literacy Councils an opportunity to work together with the Labrador Literacy Information and Action Network, Frontier College, and some NWT and Nunavut community residents to explore the potential for a collaborative, capacity-building initiative for community-based groups.

What follows is **not intended to be a formal report or an academic article** for publication. **It is a work in progress**; **a weaving together** of some of what we, as practitioners, have learned so far through our history and the process of this action research project; an attempt to reveal a picture – as we know it so far – of community-based, distance learning as a way of building capacity in remote, northern communities in Canada. We anticipate that it will also act as **a guide** for us when we plan and work on future community-based learning initiatives.

Background

Who we are

The NWT Literacy Council (http://www.nald.ca/nwtlc.htm) is a territorial not-for-profit organization that has existed since 1990. The purpose of the council is to promote and support the development of literacy through information sharing, resource development, community support services, public awareness, training opportunities and advocacy.

The Nunavut Literacy Council http://www.nald.ca/PROVINCE/NWT/ nwtlc./nunavut1.htm is the newest regional literacy organization in Canada's north. The Council emerged from the NWT Literacy Council in October 1999 when the Northwest Territories and Nunavut divided. Its role is to promote literacy in all the official languages of the territory by helping literacy practitioners to develop sustainable programs and by carrying out a range of promotional activities.

The NWT Literacy Council is currently supporting the development of the Nunavut Literacy Council in order to serve better the interests and needs of the people in

each new territory. The Boards of both the NWT and Nunavut Literacy Councils are committed partners and working jointly on a number of pan-territorial projects.

The Labrador Literacy Information and Action Network (LLIAN) was formed as a result of the first Labrador-wide literacy conference in 1995. The LLIAN encourages non-formal, self-directed, community operated learning initiatives. It also links the literacy community throughout Labrador and acts as a collaborative forum for sharing information, ideas, resources, planning and evaluation. Many of its activities are highly integrated into the fabric of community-based learning in Labrador.

> *Literacy is about more than reading and writing. It is about being able to function in our world: to understand, imagine and create in this north Atlantic environment.... as our world changes, so do the skills and knowledge we need to function effectively.*
>
> *F. Kazemek, Adapted by Frances Ennis for "Reading the Signs, An Evolving Conversation (travelling exhibition, 1996)*

Frontier College (http://www.frontiercollege.ca/) is Canada's longest serving literacy and non-formal learning organization. For over 100 years, the College has been involved in a range of literacy, learning and community-development activities across Canada and in the north. Frontier College now supports a diversity of literacy programs, primarily in urban settings, for children, youth and adults living in difficult circumstances.   In 1993, the College began collaborating with regional and local groups in Labrador. Partnerships with organizations like the LLIAN have re-connected Frontier to community-based literacy development in the north.

When we began our action research project in November 1999, our team was made up of:
- Cate Sills, Mark Tindall and Janet Skinner – Executive Directors from the northern literacy organizations;
- Lisa Campbell and Kim Crockatt – Community Development Facilitators from the NWT and Nunavut Literacy Councils. (Kim was also doing most of the work of the Nunavut Literacy Council Executive Director while Mark learned the ropes);
- Sarah Thompson – a Frontier College staff member with six years of experience in northern communities.

We also received support along the way from other organizations, notably the Status of Women's Council of the NWT.

Except for Mark, (a non-aboriginal man) we are all non-aboriginal women who have made long-term commitments to living and/or working in the north.

A bit about our history

An emerging northern, community-based learning network: 1990-2000

In the early 1990's the Labrador Institute of Northern Studies (LINS) initiated a series of small, experimental literacy development activities in remote communities on the southeast coast of Labrador. Early successes evolved into the Labrador Community Initiative in which LINS, in collaboration with Frontier College, worked together with southern coastal communities to help develop and support the growth of a broad range of self-sustaining, local literacy initiatives (family literacy, oral history projects, adult and peer youth tutoring, etc.) The overall goals of this initiative were and continue to be to:

- Increase the level of community awareness and involvement in literacy;
- Foster the development of flexible, accessible programs and initiatives that meet the literacy needs of people where they live and work;
- Encourage the development of community-based initiatives that are owned by the community;
- Build infrastructures that can support literacy development in the region on an ongoing basis.

This community literacy development process, which is just beginning on the north coast of Labrador, lead to the emergence of the Labrador Literacy Information & Action Network in 1995.

In 1996, these participatory approaches to literacy development caught the attention of the NWT Literacy Council. An exchange between the groups lead to a NWT Literacy Council initiative to enable NWT communities to develop or enhance the skills needed to plan and manage literacy and other community development projects. The goals of this initiative are to:

- Support community control and ownership over local literacy and community development projects;
- Help build local skills to plan and manage projects using participatory approaches.

This project responded to changes in the political, economic and social landscape of the NWT. Communities here had long been calling for more direct control over the development and delivery of local programs and services. Changes in governance structures in both public and Aboriginal self-government and community development initiatives introduced by the Territorial government meant that

communities and community groups would be expected to assume more responsibility.

In Labrador, the development of these local literacy initiatives had come hand-in-hand with requests for help in areas like group proposal development, volunteer committee development, project planning, evaluation, etc. This kind of "just-in-time" community-based management support resulted in a 1996 participatory design process involving LINS, Frontier College and a number of people involved in community-based activities in some of Labrador's isolated coastal communities.

From this participatory design process, two distance learning pilot projects emerged that linked locally facilitated learning circles in some of Labrador's remote communities, as well as Toronto and Yellowknife, to each other by teleconference, video and list-serve.

These teleconferences enabled participants, who came from a range of community groups, to explore topics of concern to them and to develop capacities and skills in the following areas: stress and time management, collaboration, strategic and project planning, team, leadership and facilitation skills, conflict resolution, etc. In addition to numerous spin-offs in the communities, these learning circles have gone on to become informal networks for sharing information and skills.

During our collaboration in this 1998 community-based, distance learning initiative, we saw the possibilities of a working relationship between our organizations. By collaborating in this way, we could learn and benefit from each other's experience in literacy and community development in northern communities.

Community development in northern communities

Two resource books for community workers (Erasmus, 1991; Napoleon, 1992) identify the following values of community development in aboriginal communities:
- Involvement
- Ownership and responsibility
- Information sharing
- Long-term process
- Practicality
- Common sense
- Grass roots-based

Similarly, a workshop report on research and community development in aboriginal communities offers this view.

> *The group consensus was that community development starts with an individual who has a vision arising from an appreciation of a balanced look at the community and its people. From that balanced view of the community, others in the community are included in articulating a vision of what might be. Development is a process that builds on the existing strengths of the community. It recognizes that the power of a community rests with the people of the community, not solely with its leaders. Development is the community taking responsibility to make change, (Ministry of the Solicitor General of Canada [MSGC], 1996, p. 1).*

Schuftan (1996) surveys four established approaches to community development including service delivery, capacity-building, advocacy and social mobilization. He explains capacity-building in this way.

> *Capacity building can be characterized as the approach to community development that raises people's knowledge, awareness and skills to use their own capacity and that from available support systems … capacity building helps them better understand the decision-making process; to communicate more effectively at different levels, and to make decisions, eventually instilling in them a sense of confidence to manage their own destinies. Capacity building … leads to more sustainability (p. 261).*

Several years of experience in Labrador have taught us that participatory processes are essential to the successful development of community-owned initiatives. Through a wide range of local and Labrador-wide initiatives, some of which are summarized in the previous section, we have seen that people increase their confidence and their ability to do things and make decisions when they are invited from the beginning to participate in the design and development of the projects that affect them.

This participation has allowed people to work together to recognize the skills they already have, develop new ones, be a part of shaping project activities and ultimately apply their learning to develop their own community-based initiatives. Most importantly, over time, this participation has lead to the growth of an informal network of people involved in community-based activities in Labrador who are ready, willing and able to share their experience, ideas and resource materials with those who want to get started on new initiatives.

Purpose of the action research project

The aim of this action research project was to work with people in community-based organizations and volunteer groups in the NWT and Nunavut to find out:

- Whether they were interested in a community initiative that would build capacity and develop leadership and skills.
- How they thought this initiative should be carried out.

Those who took part in the project

When we began the project we thought that we would be able to include five communities from the NWT and Nunavut. A slow start and staff changes mid-stream meant that we had to limit the number of communities to three including Cambridge Bay (Nunavut), Rae Edzo and Hay River (NWT). These communities were chosen mainly because of existing relationships with the NWT and Nunavut Literacy Councils.

The 25 or so project participants were both non-aboriginal and aboriginal. They represented a range of community interests including local and territorial government departments, band councils, culture, literacy, recreation, childcare, youth, disabilities, schools, community colleges and Friendship Centres. Most of the participants were women.

Overview of our research approaches and methods

Quigley and Kuhne (1997) describe action research as a method that places the researcher inside the research process along with those being researched. Action research can be an effective way for practitioners and communities to build on their strengths as they approach development and learning rather than focusing on their problems. Action research can be a powerful tool for creating collaborative knowledge (Peters, 1997).

Action research can split into "action" and "research" activities, which are, at best, parallel rather than collaborative. It is important for action researchers to make sure that they are upfront about their reasons for doing the research. They should also be aware that the relationships they establish between themselves and those being researched are never completely equal (Chisholm, 1990).

Research in aboriginal communities should be practical, ethical, collaborative and community-controlled (MSGC, 1996).   This report from the Ministry of the Solicitor General also recommends that research methods should be participatory by involving people in all stages of the process and by giving information back regularly and continuously. More formal research models and approaches have been ineffective in capturing the social and cultural complexities of remote settings and aboriginal communities. (Maguire & McAlpine, 1996; MSGC, 1996).   Maguire and McAlpine (1996) go on to note that methods for gathering information should be rooted in the setting and context where the research is taking place. Informal approaches that have proved effective for them in the past, include using student maps, drawings and stories and just being a normal, friendly person in between the structured sessions.

We chose to use an action research approach because we wanted to be inside the research process, not outside observers. Coming from regional and national literacy organizations we knew that we needed to work and learn collaboratively with community members.

When we proposed the action research project we had the following questions in mind.

- To what extent are people who are already involved in community-based activities, interested in and ready to participate in collaborative learning and skills development?
- How would this capacity-building initiative relate to current and future needs, interests and activities of community-based groups?
- What delivery methods, approaches and technologies would be most appropriate?
- What can we learn from the literature and examples of other relevant northern projects about collaboration and community-based, distance learning?
- To what extent does community participation in action research encourage a sense of ownership and a desire to participate in future delivery?
- To what extent are people interested in linking with those involved in initiatives similar to their own in other parts of northern Canada?

In addition to the complex planning, design and logistical "wiring" [1] challenges we faced as the collaborative project team, we used the following research framework to try to answer our questions.

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[1] A metaphor we use to describe the complexity of organizing this type of work – it's in the background and often invisible.

A literature search

The literature search was carried out during the fall and early winter (1999 – 2000). This involved a survey of relevant books, articles, reports and web documents to find out more about what others were doing and saying on the subject of collaboration and community-based distance learning in northern Canada.

Two phases of action research

The action research components took place in the late winter and early spring (2000). <u>Phase One consisted of a one-day workshop in each community</u> where participants were invited to:

- Share information about other community-based management training activities;
- Talk about the strengths and challenges of running community-based activities;
- Sample a range of management training activities and resources;
- Make connections between community needs and possible training;
- Develop an action plan for future distance learning.

Throughout the workshop session we used a range of activities to carry out these objectives, including:

- Drawing and then talking through our introductions;
- Brainstorming community-maps;
- Creating and talking about imaginary community groups;
- Seeing, trying out and/or talking about a range of learning activities about personal management, communication, planning, teams, leadership, etc.;
- Exploring a kit of sample resource materials and videos;
- Reflecting on and discussing management learning interests and needs;
- Deciding as a group what to deal with at a follow-up teleconference.

<u>Phase Two involved two follow-up teleconferences</u> (two hours each). These took place a week apart and linked the participants in each of the three communities with facilitators in Labrador. The content of these teleconferences included the issues the participants had said they wanted to discuss. They were designed as informal learning circles so that participants could experience what it was like to be part of such a circle and to link with community-based practitioners in other remote communities.

How we worked together

As a collaborative design team we got together for planning, action research and evaluation activities. Otherwise, we linked our already busy selves from where we were rooted in Happy Valley-Goose Bay (Labrador), Yellowknife (NWT), Cambridge Bay (Nunavut) and Toronto (Ontario) to do the bulk of our designing, communicating, negotiating and reflecting via teleconference and list-serve.

Over the course of the seven months or so in which we worked intensely together on the project we found that we developed, to varying degrees, many of the characteristics of collaborative design teams (Sherry & Meyers, 1998). These are summarized below:

- The team takes ownership of the task.
- Designers see themselves as learners – designing is a learning process.
- The team gradually builds a common knowledge base.
- Everyone has a different level of knowledge and expertise; these develop at different rates; experts coach novices.
- Team members learn to see things from many perspectives.
- The team learns to use confrontation as a way to re-structure what they know.
- The team uses face-to-face sessions for big picture stuff and sharing information on communication styles.
- The role of the skeptic is valued.
- The team is both cohesive and self-organizing; leadership is distributed.
- Research questions emerge from the design process.
- Team members are committed to reflection.
- The team sees design as a flexible process and is comfortable establishing weak links between problems and possible solutions.
- Group discussions involve negotiation, conflict resolution, goal setting and planning.
- Team members stay on track via e-mail with messages that support, inform as well as deal with administrative stuff.

As part of a final reflection activity near the end of the project, we identified some key issues that made the collaboration particularly challenging for us. As a collaborative team, we all felt responsible for the success of the project. However, one team member had the role of the contractor and, in addition, most of the activity took place on her "turf". She commented that the administrative role imposed on her spilled over into all other areas the project (working relationships, design activities, mentoring, etc.) and meant that she often felt more like a

"contractor" than a "collaborator".   Another team member emphasized the intensity of work needed to carry out the collaboration; the project was "hard work but worth it". We also talked about the importance of everyone listening to each other so that people could bring up and discuss things that made them uncomfortable. We agreed that if any of us were taking training, we would make that information and any resources associated with it, available to the others.

Over the course of our collaboration this year we wended our way back and forth through the stages of development that Marshall & Reason (1993) identify for "communities of inquiry". These include:

- Inclusion
- Influence
- Intimacy

In a way, our experience of this collaborative process is reflected by Singley and Sweeney (1998). They describe collaboration as " … both an outward connection to others and an internal struggle against a foreign, harmful force that threatens one's autonomy" (p. 64).

How we worked in the communities

At the beginning of the action research project, the collaborative project team got together and used a graphic planning tool called PATH (*Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope*) (http://www.inclusion.com/video.reviews.html) to create a shared picture about:

- what we saw as being important over the long term and
- a plan for carrying out the action research project.

As a project team we were all "outsiders" to various degrees with respect to Cambridge Bay, Rae Edzo and Hay River. While we, rather than the communities, were responsible for initiating and carrying out the action research project, it was important for us to work as collaboratively as possible with the communities. So, we worried about whether we might be trying to impose our vision of what could be. A report done for the Ministry of the Solicitor General of Canada (1996) outlines the characteristics that community-owned research groups should look for when choosing outside consultants. These include:

- Respecting the community's responsibility and right to control the process;
- Helping the group to identify others who should be involved;

- Understanding the group's issues;
- Being committed to the project;
- Being confident, adaptable, flexible and a facilitator;
- Knowing their own biases and being able to help the group see their own;
- Having a strong ethical base;
- Explaining things clearly so that everyone understands;
- Being clear about what they can and can't do;
- Being able to make the group feel comfortable.

We shared our emerging vision of a northern, community-based learning network with the participants in the action research workshops. We received supportive comments about this vision from community people. Everyone seemed to like the idea of a learning network that linked people in northern communities. One person suggested that she could find someone in the community who could make a wall hanging of the image that we had drawn.

Our early "vision" of where we wanted to go

The key elements of our "unlimited" future included …

The permafrost of community values cannot be gouged by the "corporate shovel".

Strong communities have developed their own tools and resource materials.

Caches of community-building tools are available to those who need them.

A northern learning network of people – represented by the scrub willow – that link up as needed to share experiences, ideas and resource materials in ways that respect traditional ways of learning and teaching.

Community context

While no two northern communities are the same, they do share a number of common features including:

- Geographic isolation which makes transportation and communication very costly and time consuming;
- Challenging political dynamics among people and groups;
- Delicate, complex and overlapping networks of relationships;
- Small numbers of people with the skills and capacities needed to take on the enormous responsibilities of local development;
- Limited access to resources of all kinds including training;
- Indigenous cultures struggling to survive and adapt in the face of relentless change.

These features make it difficult for people in remote areas to develop and sustain the kinds of community-based groups and networks they need in order for their communities to survive in increasingly complex and changing environments.

Learning and education are seen by some northern women as one of the key ways to support community-based development.

> *Training is not always accessible to women in small rural isolated areas … with its lack of transportation infrastructure and small population pockets, areas such as Labrador and the northern territories of Canada are a major challenge in program planning and delivery, (Dorothy Earle, HRDC Outreach Worker, Mary's Harbour, Labrador).*

> *The most active groups of people in our rural communities are women. These women not only raise families, but also provide strong leadership. Many women fill prominent positions as Mayor, Economic & Social Directors, Chairperson, etc. They would love to have the opportunity to enhance their skills, or just step out from the hustle and bustle of their day to day activities and spend some time looking at what it is they would like to learn more about, (Roxanne Notley, Outreach Counsellor, Port Hope Simpson, Labrador).*

What the communities told us about themselves

THIS IS WHAT WE DID AS PART OF THE ON-SITE WORKSHOP:

The following information is not a complete description of the communities that took part in the project. This information was gathered mostly during the action research workshops using community map brainstorms. The purpose of this activity was to:
- *provide additional orientation for the outside facilitators and*
- *produce a shared sketch of some of the resources and activities in the communities.*

Cambridge Bay, Nunavut

Cambridge Bay (http://www.polarnet.ca/polarnet/cambay.htm) is a remote community located 300 km north of the Arctic Circle. Its growing population – a mix of both Inuit and non-Inuit - stands at about 1,350 residents. Workshop and teleconference participants came from local government, the community college and groups involved in childcare, culture and literacy activities.

People described themselves as open, friendly, tolerant and inventive. In the community, a number of groups are involved in children's literacy, parenting, culture, youth, justice and elder activities.   A new cultural centre is planned and a book about the legend of Uvajuk, (http://maxpages.com/betelgeuse/Uvajuk) put together with the support of local elders, has recently been published.   There are several businesses including the meat plant, a charter company, an Internet service provider, hotels, restaurants and take-outs. Some people also support themselves through home-based businesses such as guiding. Education facilities include college programs, the school and the library. There are also health and recreation services and facilities. Tourism contributes to the economy and people are quick to point out the importance of the land – its scenery, musk ox, wild orchids and bird life.

As a part of the emergent territory of Nunavut, Cambridge Bay is undergoing significant changes. Workshop participants pointed out that these changes create opportunities and tensions within the community. They also stressed the importance of holding on to their traditions.

Rae Edzo, NWT

Rae Edzo is one of a group of four Dogrib communities in the territory. The community – which is really the older community of Fort Rae and the newer community of Edzo just up the road - is located about an hour's drive north of Yellowknife. With a population of about 1,700 it is also the largest aboriginal community in the territory. About 25% of the residents are under the age of 12. Workshop and teleconference participants came from the Friendship Centre , local government, social services, the community college and the school.

The mapping brainstorm carried out during the on-site workshop focused on the levels of government, their activities and services. The Dogrib are working toward self-government in the next fifteen years under Treaty 11. Many of the changes in the community are a result of increasing responsibilities for health, justice, education and infrastructure.

One theme that emerged during the mapping activity was the role of men and women in the community. Traditional culture remains strong. Men still tend to seek their livelihood on the land or, because of the need for paid employment, outside the community. One participant noted that many more women than men are finishing high school and going on to post-secondary education. Tension and conflict are likely to increase if these women choose to pursue positions of authority beyond the community level.

Hay River, NWT

Hay River is a major inland port on the southern edge of Great Slave Lake. It is the second largest community in the territory (population between 3500 and 3800). Depending on where you're coming from, it is accessible by road, air or water. Our workshop and teleconference participants came from government, the reserve, the community college, and organizations involved with literacy, teen moms, etc.

The town, we were told during the community mapping activity, has an entrepreneurial streak. Larger industries such as shipping, fishing and logging thrive along with retail activities, restaurants, hotels, etc. Three levels of government (federal, territorial and local) have a presence in the community and there is also a hospital, a library, three schools and a community college. The group identified a diversity of organizations, services and activities in the community such as the Friendship Centre, Growing Together, a literacy committee, a soup kitchen, a tourist committee and many others.

The Reserve (the only one in the territory) in addition to being responsible for the regional treatment centre, Aboriginal Head Start programs, economic development activities and municipal services is also home to the Dene Cultural Institute.

Community qualities, hopes and fears

THIS IS WHAT WE DID AS PART OF THE ON-SITE WORKSHOP:

> *As an introduction, we asked the workshop groups to draw and talk about some of the things in their communities that they were proud of – their strengths, their fears and hopes. While there were some differences in what the groups chose to talk about, there were also some common themes.*

What we learned from this activity:

During this part of the workshop, the groups told us that they were proud of their people, traditions, organizations and education. Community strengths and qualities included culture, friendliness, patience and a willingness to work together. In all cases people were concerned about substance abuse. They also mentioned crime, low literacy levels, and the fact that teen pregnancy often caused young women to leave school.   Their hopes for their communities included working together more, seeing young mothers complete their education, happy families, going out onto the land and more money for community-based activities.

Examples of imaginary community-based groups

THIS IS WHAT WE DID AS PART OF THE ON-SITE WORKSHOP:

> *We invited participants to begin this activity by identifying an issue and <u>creating an imaginary community-based approach</u> to deal with this issue. This included imagining some of the strengths and needs of the group carrying out the activity. The purpose of the activity was to give people a way to talk about some of the strengths and needs of community groups in general.   In small communities we have found this strategy helps people to talk about real needs without taking unnecessary risks by talking directly about their own or somebody else's needs.*

Here are the **imaginary community-based groups** that were explored during the workshop.

The **Community Support Group** was made up of committed people who have different skills, knowledge and experiences. The group saw their role as advising and supporting youth programs. One thing they worried about was that they might end up trying to manage rather than to support teens.

The **Host Committee** was representative of the community and made up of a range of people, both traditional and modern, with different levels of knowledge. The role of the Host Committee was to organize events, invite people and events into the community, communicate about who was coming into town, plan and be a link among groups. People on the Host Committee were open to working together and receptive to new ideas. They feared that other groups would not get involved and that the level of transience in the community would mean inconsistent leadership.

The **FAS/FAE Focus Group** wanted to help the community to understand and deal with the realities of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. This group was very interested in getting started and indicated that they already had some funding to do this. They were concerned about the potential impact of labeling people and it was important to them that their activities last long enough to be effective. For these reasons they wanted to make sure that others in the community were behind them.

The **Literacy Group** was made up of a few hard working folks. They already knew what some of the literacy problems and issues were in the community. They had already hired an instructor who goes to where her learners are rather than expecting them to come to a classroom. They hoped to raise awareness in the community about the importance of literacy. The group really wanted to get more helpers and learners involved.

Here's a summary of the themes that emerged from the discussion about these imaginary groups.

Strengths	Fears	Needs
• Commitment • Different skills, experience and knowledge • Open to working together • Receptive to new ideas • Communication • Desire to organize • Partnerships	• Youth suicide • Teen pregnancy • Non-participation from community • Managing youth instead of supporting them • Lack of clarity around roles • One person running the show • Limited local or consistent leadership • Project will not be community driven • A large need that is not being met	• Training, research, $ • Knowledgeable and committed leadership • Common sense of purpose and goals • Focus, flexibility • Diversity of participation • More trained local people • Community buy-in in order to sustain and grow • More partnerships and people working on issues • To reach more people

Strengths, fears and needs of community-based groups

Topics of interest for further community-based learning

THIS IS WHAT WE DID AS PART OF THE ON-SITE WORKSHOP:

During the on-site workshops we invited participants to take a look at sample resource materials and try out a number of activities related to personal management; communications; planning tools for groups; teams, leadership and facilitation; and collaborative project planning.

After they had had a chance to try some things out, people got into small groups and developed mind maps identifying:
- *topics they wanted to learn more about, and*
- *why these topics were important to them.*

We then did a dotmocracy (a way of determining what most people wanted) to prioritize the topics so that we could plan a sample teleconference using these priorities.

The learning groups at each site identified a number of topics that they were interested in learning about or finding more resources on.

Topics	Why Important
Collaboration	For combining goals, talents & resources; realizing and appreciating what others can do; learning to work with many people; stop blaming others and take responsibility; important for work to get done.
Power in Groups	Dealing with different agendas, positions of power, polarity responders; fear of challenge; dealing with "usurpers"; cross-cultural dynamics.
Leadership Styles	Organizing; mentoring; understanding development processes.
Working through Conflict	To be able to work within conflict and handle it respectfully; need for win/win situations; potential for conflict is everywhere.
Stress Management	Dealing with nature of job, numerous responsibilities, lots of listening, having to make unpopular decisions; care for the caregivers; need to find outlets, health balance, momentum, staying connected to inner sources of strength.
Time Management	To reduce stress of busy schedule; be more efficient, prioritize, reach goals, be organized, avoid procrastination.
Learning Skills	To be able to learn as much as possible.
Tools for Working in Groups and Graphic Tools	Dealing with limited funding; best use of resources; challenges of different cultures, values & languages; working cooperatively and collaboratively; planning better futures for community & our children.
Strategic Planning	To get things done with order and not a lot of wasted time.
Team Roles and Cycles	Understanding our roles; getting things done; reaching mutual understanding; reaching common goals; equalizing balance of power and weaknesses; delegating and sharing the work.
Project Planning & Proposal Writing	Getting the basics, setting clear groundwork & direction; accessing other pots of $$.
Clear Language	For clarity and understanding; in speaking and writing; making sure what is said and heard; for teleconferences.

One of the problems that we experienced with this part of the workshop was that we did not feel we had heard enough about why the topics people chose were important to them. We had hoped to hear more stories and anecdotes that would give us further information about the specific contexts in which people were working.

This lack of context information may have been because we had invited people to talk about their choices in small groups and then report these choices and reasons back to the larger group. Our relationships with participants may also have been

too new for them to feel comfortable telling us more about their own experiences and contexts. Given the politics in small communities, it is also possible that they were not comfortable sharing this information with each other. This kind of approach to learning works best when people are able to fill the activities with their own content. So, it is also possible that the workshops did not give participants enough opportunity to do this. The group in Cambridge Bay did say to us that they wished the workshop could have been longer than one day. Additional interviews with a few key participants would have given us more detailed information but this was beyond the scope of our project.

Summary of community-based context

Participants in the NWT and Nunavut communities that we visited were proud of their traditions, their education and their willingness to work together to support their communities. They also demonstrated a capacity for community-based ingenuity in responding to local needs. While the communities varied in their degree and sense of isolation, the majority of them faced significant changes due to trends in aboriginal self-government as well as issues important to women and youth. Many participants voiced the need to form partnerships and increase involvement at the local level.

When given the time to talk about the kinds of skill areas and topics that would be relevant to them in their work, all three groups made collaboration their first learning priority.   Power, leadership, conflict and stress also emerged as important themes.

The question for us as regional and national organizations with an interest in learning becomes …

> How can we provide opportunities for people to learn what they want and need to learn and do it ways that:

- Respect the complexity of the local context?
- Value the knowledge and strengths of community residents?
- Welcome a diversity of experiences and needs?
- Build collaborative relationships between people and groups?

Learning approaches, methods and technologies

Approaches to facilitating learning

As a result of our work we have slowly pieced together an approach to facilitating learning that is participatory, rich in relationships and as rooted in local context as we can make it. The literature search turned up a number of references that describe aspects of our approach.   Some have been developed into full-blown, knob and dial-encrusted learning technologies. They may all sound quite similar to you and they are. They explore different angles of the same process. Although complex, none of it is, as they say, "rocket science".

Adult learning principles

In *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach* , Jane Vella (1994) describes 12 principles of adult learning which "have been proven to work under diverse and difficult situations" (p. 3).

- Participants take part in naming what is to be learned. (And, we would add, how it is to be learned.)
- The learning environment and process create a feeling of safety.
- A sound relationship exists between the facilitator and the learner.
- Appropriate sequencing and reinforcement of content is used.
- Learning happens by doing and reflecting.
- Learners are the subjects of their own learning.
- Ideas, feelings and actions are all part of learning.
- The learning is immediately relevant.
- People have and are helped to develop clear roles.
- Learning takes place through teams and small groups.
- Learners are engaged in what they are learning.
- Learners know what they have learned.

Study circles

The Pincher Creek Community Adult Literacy Council states that "Study Circles are an effective way of facilitating inexpensive educational opportunities where the students take responsibility for their own learning. Learning in the study circle setting is not passive and requires a commitment to active thinking and learning" (p. 1). http://www.nald.ca/CLR/study/scguide.htm.
This web-based document goes on to describe circles as an old way of learning. These days study circles are used in all kinds of settings from universities to

neighbourhoods. They can number anywhere from five to twenty people and are usually facilitated by someone who helps to keep the group on track.   They come together to look at a common topic. Everyone's viewpoint is considered and the group's purpose is to increase understanding and awareness. Many different kinds of materials are used by study circles as part of their learning process. Study circles often lead to action (p. 1).

Kitchen table learning

In her book, Lori Neilsen (1998) explores a process that she calls kitchen table inquiry. She describes this social learning process as one that:
- gets beyond the separation between work and life;
- develops inquiring habits of mind;
- creates relationships with others that accept our own conflicting identities;
- builds common identity through a shared history.

These experiences are also about having a sense of community with others. They are often missing in the lives of those who live in cities, work in more formal organizations, or who experience a feeling of isolation from those around them. In small or remote communities, it is much easier to blur the boundaries between work and the rest of life because the same people, issues and activities inhabit both places. The small numbers of people make habits of kinship and mutual survival a necessary part of life and time passed together in an isolated place creates a shared history (whether you like it or not) and a common identity through connection with the land.

Cooperative inquiry

In *The Layperson's Guide to Cooperative Inquiry*, Reason and Heron introduce cooperative inquiry as:

> …a way of working with other people who have similar concerns and interests to yourself, in order to understand your world, make sense of your life and develop new and creative ways of looking at things, learn how to act to change things you may want to change and find out how to do things better.
> http://www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/layguide.htm (p. 1)

The guide describes cooperative inquiry is a form of action research that allows people to work together to increase their understanding about something and to do what they can to create change.   Reason and Heron identify a number of processes that are usually part of a cooperative inquiry. These include:

- Going through the research a number of times;
- Balancing action and reflection;
- Developing the ability to look critically at your own work;
- Being able to collaborate;
- Dealing with distress;
- Being able to work with both chaos and order (p. 10).

According to Hallinger (1997) the process of finding things out cooperatively "… aside from any content about teamwork, group dynamics, and collaborative work cultures – fosters the ability to accomplish results through other people, a hallmark of leadership" (p. 596).

Problem-based learning

Problem-based learning (PBL) has become increasingly important in the training of doctors, pharmacists and other kinds of professionals.   However, it would probably not be out of line to say that this kind of learning has existed outside the formal education system for longer than anyone can remember.

The literature we came across on PBL tends to be very technical. Spronk (1994) offers a definition that relates to community work.

> *The primary objective of PBL is to accumulate basic concepts in the context of real problems or issues that learners encounter in their work as community workers, on the assumption that acquiring knowledge in this way can assist learners in remembering and applying that knowledge in their community work"* (p.12).

Some of the instructional principles that have been identified as part of PBL (Savery & Duffy, 1995) include:
- Rooting activities inside a larger framework or context;
- Supporting learners to take ownership of the problem and the process for solving it;
- Designing tasks that are real and that reflect the complexity of the real environment;
- Supporting and challenging learner thinking;
- Providing opportunities to test knowledge with other views and in other situations;
- Reflecting on both the content and the process of learning.

People who have been active in their communities or workplaces have learned how to follow their hunches, figure out what things mean and to solve problems. They may need opportunities beyond their everyday experience in order to learn new

concepts and skills (Choi & Hannafin, 1995). These authors call this capacity to think in place "situated cognition" and they explore characteristics of learning environments that help college and university students to develop this ability. These characteristics create opportunities for these students to:

- use or develop their everyday thinking skills;
- apply their knowledge as a problem solving tool;
- learn through real tasks rather than made up ones;
- transfer what they learn into real-life situations;
- find out about the thought processes used by more experienced, or "expert" practitioners.

Choi & Hannafin (1995) also review facilitation strategies for supporting students to do these things. These include:

- Modeling, or making visible, the thought processes that underlie what more experienced practitioners do;
- Providing enough structure so that learners are able to use new knowledge;
- Coaching, guiding and advising;
- Collaborating;
- Making available a range of tools and resource materials.

Bawden (1991) reframes PBL into an approach to learning that focuses on opportunities rather than problems.

> *Dividing the world into convenient problems, reduces complex situations in ways that are themselves problematical. The idea of a problem always seems to connote trouble – worrying concerns that what is actually happening is somehow a wrong that can be righted. Moreover, the nature of any recognizable problem so often appears to be determined by the pre-existing solution (p. 308).*

Distance learning in aboriginal communities

Spronk (1995) suggests that the main purpose of university and college distance education programs in aboriginal communities is to:

> *… enable Aboriginal people to learn about the values, structures, and processes of the dominant society in ways that build on and enrich their own heritage and culture, to come to see the world "through two pairs of eyes" (McAlpine, Cross, Whiteduck & Wolforth, 1990 p. 83) … It is not only Aboriginal learners who come to see the world through two pairs of eyes … This means (non-Aboriginal educators) coming to terms with Aboriginal ways of seeing the world, and learning to shape educational activities in terms that build on these ways rather than diminish or destroy them (p. 82).*

Raffan (1992) refers to Castillano's comparison between "indigenous knowledge" and "western scientism" (p. 337). An awareness of these two different ways of knowing may help non-aboriginal educators to identify some of the invisible assumptions they have about what knowledge.

Indigenous Knowledge	Western Scientism
Oral	Written
Percepts	Concepts
Multiple views	Truth & error
Intuitive affective	Intellectual
Subjective	Objectives
Contextual	Generalizeable
Apprenticeship	Marketplace of ideas
Metaphorical	Literal
Collectively owned	Individual rights

Although no two aboriginal communities are the same and everyone is different in the extent to which they rely on traditional or modern ways, there is a core of five ethics that underlie traditional ways of being (Spronk, 1995). These include:
- Not interfering with the rights, privileges and activities of another person;
- Not damaging relationships by showing anger;
- Appreciating others by asking or expecting them to continue rather than by giving praise;
- Watching and being quiet in a new situation;
- Doing things when the time is right (p. 82-83).

Fisher Brillinger and Cantrell (1993) observe that aboriginal learning is similar to an experiential learning style. Spronk (1995) suggests a "watch, prepare, then do" (p. 92) approach to learning.

Spronk (1995) goes on to review a number of strategies for making distance learning more effective for aboriginal learners. Some of these include:

- Providing face to face contact between instructors, tutors and students;
- Using teleconferencing to bring people together and to make the materials clear;
- Using instructors who have experience working with aboriginal learners;
- Adapting materials to the context and making them useful for interdependent learners;
- Using aboriginal resource people;
- Making sure that the workload is appropriate (p. 91-94).

Spronk (1995) also flags several challenges for those involved in designing and delivering programs for aboriginal learners. These challenges include:

- Finding appropriate methods and approaches to delivering programs;
- Creating materials that reflect the knowledge and experience of the learners;
- Dealing with the internal and external political issues that arise through the process of collaboration (p. 91-94).

What we have done in the past

In the community-based, distance learning initiatives described earlier in this report, we used a number of strategies and components to make the learning as rooted, collaborative and as flexible as possible. These distance learning initiatives involved informal learning circles of participants numbering anywhere from three to eighteen in each community, along with a local site facilitator or two. Most participants were involved in community-based activities. Others were interested in becoming involved. Some participants came for social reasons. The learning circles met once a week for about three hours over a twenty-week period to discuss:

- personal management;
- conflict resolution;
- teams, leadership and facilitation;
- strategic planning and
- collaborative project planning.

Typically, a teleconference session had the following format:
- a check-in time so that the people in each learning circle could get caught up on the week's news;
- some initial on-line time when project facilitators would introduce the evening's activities;
- a mix of activities that the local, site facilitators and the learning circles could do on their own;
- some on-line time in which people could talk to and hear from those in the other learning circles; where possible, people were also linked up by list-serve.

During the teleconference sessions, the learning circles worked their way through a set of prepared teleconference materials. These materials were designed to allow the learning circles to fill them with their own content. For example, several teleconferences were usually devoted to strategic planning. In these sessions one person or community group would volunteer to be the subject of the strategic plan. Using this local content, the learning circles would work their way through a strategic planning process.

Other aspects of these learning initiatives that helped to make them collaborative and flexible included:

- Including participants with a range of education, skills, experience and learning styles;
- Providing clear language teleconference materials with additional handouts and web-based resources for those who wanted more;
- Assembling kits of resource materials that could be used by anyone wanting more depth on a particular topic and that would remain in the community after the project was finished;
- Doing up front team-building activities within the learning groups at each site and among the sites including introductory video letters, culture boxes and story telling;
- Using a wide range of teleconference activities such as role-plays, games, mini-lectures, research activities, team projects, videos, tools, checklists, and graphics in order to provide opportunities for participants to reflect on their experiences, ideas and challenges and explore these with others;
- Having an ongoing conversation with local facilitators and participants about how the project was going;
- Involving participants in designing, re-designing and delivering the project.

Action research findings on learning approaches, methods and technologies

Limitations

"Development work [in aboriginal communities] should be recognized as being a long-term process. If not, it is highly unlikely that the community will benefit" (Napoleon, 1992 p. 19).   Calling this project an "action research" project suggests that the research comes first and then the program, or whatever, comes after. Although this is true in the sense that you have to start somewhere, it is also true that our "action learning approach to research" (Morgan, 1997 p. 296) about what works and what doesn't and why, began before we started this project and will continue long after this particular project is finished.

The limits of this action research project meant that we were able to use the on-site workshop and two teleconferences to provide participants with "a taste" of what it was like to be a part of a learning circle, to learn cooperatively and to link with people in other communities. We used part of the second teleconference to gather feedback on learning approaches, methods and technologies. A number of the suggestions made by participants (for example, coaching people to use the teleconference equipment, including organizational and participant bios, providing resource lists) would be part of a larger learning initiative.   Below is a summary of participant feedback.

Style of delivery

- Most people were very interested in the concept of this type of cooperative learning.
- Many really liked the way that the process draws upon people's different skills and knowledge to add richness to the discussion.
- Many liked how it was organized (self-directed yet structured).
- Many liked the laid back atmosphere in the room and felt comfortable.
- Some commented that it was good to get together with people in the community and talk about programs and issues; it was a good opportunity for groups in the community to talk amongst themselves.
- Others commented that it was different from the expectation of being taught vs. what people already know and learning from others.
- Some hoped this non-formal style of learning is a way to engage those who are excluded because of low literacy levels.
- Involving people in this way in designing a learning opportunity is new for many.

Some participants suggested that the style of delivery would not be engaging enough for youth and that getting youth involved was very important. Some also wanted to hear more feedback from the other communities during the teleconferences.

Materials and presentation

- Liked Kim's[2] flip chart representation of Sarah and Janet's agenda graphic.
- Materials were thorough and well organized.

Participants said it was important to have the teleconference materials ahead of time and to have agendas and an overview of the content before the program begins. They also wanted to see information on participating organizations and personal biographies. Resource lists and useful web addresses were suggested as well as inviting participants to share information about resource materials that they found useful.

On-site and distance delivery

- Realized that using teleconference style is not a replacement for learning but an addition;
- Style of learning through teleconference is a good way to learn about communications, dealing with conflict and difficult people, interpersonal situations;
- Liked the idea of being on-line for the introduction and set-up and then going off line to discuss issues amongst themselves;
- Enjoyed that it is a small group; 6 - 8 people maximum;
- Mixed on-site and teleconferencing makes more sense;
- Personal contact is important;
- On-site facilitation is important because it helps to focus the group;
- Off-line conversation is very stimulating.

Participants had the usual difficulties with teleconferencing. They commented on the poor sound quality from some sites, the loss of personal connection that happens when you can't see people, the need to coach people on how to use the equipment and the challenge of concentrating. They mentioned the potential difficulties of working across several time zones. One group recommended smaller groups and short, concise on-line sessions. Some also wondered about the possibility of trying other technologies.

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[2] Kim Crockatt was acting as site facilitator

Usefulness of content

- Liked that it was relevant to their issues;
- Liked the idea of using that type of training for groups in small communities (e.g. Recreation Committees) because these groups are often overlooked;
- Found discussion on collaboration and power in groups very interesting and relevant and generated many important points;
- Enjoyed the new ways of looking at things and new ideas.

Participants suggested other content areas like strategic planning, fundraising, negotiating, promotion and increasing community participation.   Some suggested that the content could be tailored to specific groups and that sessions would be more informative if everyone was working on the same topic.

Linking with other communities

- Like to learn from other communities and hear what is happening;
- Liked the idea of being connected to new resources and people; gives you the feeling of not being isolated; liked sharing ideas;
- All participants thought that this was important or really important; vital for the NWT Literacy Council;
- Lets isolated groups see outside the box – access to new ideas would get them out of the same old ruts;
- A way to share problems and challenges;
- A way to save costs;
- Useful if there are common interests; if grassroots projects are linked into content;
- A way to support community organizations, e.g. linking with Rae Edzo through Family Literacy programs.

Interest and readiness of communities

- Some interest – depends on the topics and the timing.

Participants suggested other communities and groups that could be approached or included in a future community-based, capacity-building initiative. Groups suggested included Recreation, Student Councils and Education Councils. Cape Dorset and Kugaaruk were suggested as communities that might be interested in participating. Some participants wondered whether this kind of learning could be delivered to just one organization in a community.   They also pointed out that organizational leaders should support the idea of people taking part in this kind of

learning activity, especially in communities where the senior positions tend to be dominated by outsiders. Similarly, some people suggested that working people would not want to give up an evening to take part in this kind of activity.

> *Perhaps the reason why the Cambridge Bay group really liked it is that we are a much more isolated community …we have fewer resources and fewer opportunities (especially for non-profits and community groups) because of the expense. Most of the people who had experience in our groups (C. G. & T., the college people) could see the value of this in communities such as Kugaaruk and Cape Dorset.*

Other examples of distance learning in support of community development

We did not expect that the literature search would turn up any examples of learning initiatives that were the same as the collaborative management training or this Action Research Project. There are probably several explanations for this but for the time being the most plausible one is probably that most of the people designing, implementing and evaluating participatory distance learning initiatives that operate outside formal institutions like universities or colleges simply would not have the time or the energy left over to write them up!

There were, however, a number of examples (both historical and more current) of initiatives – some northern and some not - that were similar in some way to what we were doing.

Some historical examples

The roots of community-based distance learning in remote communities can probably be found in many places. Our reading turned up two relevant sources, one rural and the other northern.

Rural

The International Extension College [IEC] (1977) describes the development of non-formal distance education in *Seeking the Barefoot Technologist*. This booklet suggests that the origins of this type of learning can be found in agricultural extension, farm forums, radio campaigns and radiophonic schools.   These approaches were developed both in Canada and internationally to provide learning and development opportunities for people living in rural places.   The IEC provides this summary.

> *… the various different approaches to using distance teaching for rural development have all, rightly, been rooted in agriculture, and have tried to reconcile the human advantages of face-to-face learning with the power and extent of mass communications, using radio and print. Farm forums have shown one way of organizing rural education but have been limited by their concentration on agriculture and attracted relatively small audiences. Radio campaigns have proved an effective way of educating large numbers of people, on specific topics over a very short period, but have not provided a continuous or sequential education for those taking part, and can be criticized for offering only spasmodic bursts of education for their participants. Radio schools have worked towards a continuous curriculum but have been hampered by their working against, rather than with, the major forces within the societies where they are active (p. 16).*

In Canada, for example, the National Radio Farm Forum was a large scale and successful strategy to "harness rural education" (IEC, 1977, p. 10) and promote a sense of national community (Selman & Dampier, 1991, p. 51). It ran from 1941 until 1965. An initiative of the Canadian Association of Adult Education, the Canadian Federation of Agriculture and the CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation), the farm forum used local groups, printed pamphlets and radio broadcasts to deal with a weekly topic.

> *The listening groups, having read the pamphlet and having met to listen to the broadcast, then turned off the radio and went on to discuss the subject, afterwards conveying their opinions or consensus to a "provincial secretary", who went on the air at the end of each broadcast in order to report back to all groups on reactions to the previous week's topic. By these means, rural listeners in all parts of Canada were engaged over a 26-week season in the consideration of a range of topics generally related to the interests of rural people – topics on agricultural policy, international trade, community and family life, or other public affairs topics (Selman & Dampier, 1991, p. 51).*

IEC's (1977) booklet was the result of a workshop on distance teaching and rural development within the context of the non-formal education. It characterized non-formal education as a half-finished patchwork quilt rather than a system (p. 22). Some of the main issues covered by the workshop participants still seem relevant to us in our own work. These include the importance of knowing the political context, an emphasis on learning in groups rather than alone, the choice and use of media depending on the task and issues about coordination and evaluation.

Northern

In aboriginal and remote, northern communities in Canada, the use of communications technologies like print and radio for non-formal adult learning,

developed more slowly.   The Inukshuk project (1978 – 81) used a satellite to support and create opportunities for communication among six communities in the NWT and Nunavut. A project of the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada and funded by the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, the Inukshuk project used technologies like teleconferencing, film and video. It tested the satellite for a variety of uses including meetings, Inuktitut broadcasting and adult and children's education. These creative projects involved local people in their design, operation and in the preparation of materials for broadcast. Examples of how these projects were used include interactive sessions on issues relevant to the community like hunting and trapping, health, adult education and government.

> *The interactive element of Inukshuk contributed most to its success as an educational and developmental experiment, for in the sharing of information lie the seeds of social action and change (Stiles, 1984, p. 21).*

In the 1984 report entitled *Communications and Information Technologies and the Education of Canada's Native Peoples*, Stiles summarizes some issues and concerns that we found relevant to our own experience. These included "the need to exploit the interactive capacity of new technologies" and the need for culturally appropriate materials (p. 37).

The current scene

Distance education

Through the literature search we came across several, more recent Canadian examples of formal education initiatives that were related in some way to the distance learning activities that we have been involved in. There are likely others. The examples listed below were larger in scale than our own activities and were offered through partnership arrangements among education institutions, the private sector and government.

> *Community Leadership at a Distance* (1996 – 98), Royal Roads University.
> http://olt-bta.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/publicat/rrleader.html

> *Community Economic Development in northern Saskatchewan*
> http://www.idrc.ca/acacia/nordicit/profiles/ced.htm

> *Management Training at a Distance for Inuit Administrators* (Gruber & Coldevin, 1994).

> *Educational Approaches for Participatory Development* (Spronk, 1994).

We found these examples relevant because they used or tested a number of distance learning strategies to provide learning programs in leadership, economic development, management skills and participatory development. Some of the instructional and delivery methods used included small groups, local facilitation, televised instruction, visiting mentors, Internet-based audio and video conferencing and more.

As non-institutional, collaborative designers, deliverers and participants in community-based, distance learning, we recognized a number of familiar themes from these and other examples. These are summarized below.

- Organizational and financial pressures outside the project can have enormous impact on the capacity of small organizations to make this kind of initiative happen.
- Consistent leadership is necessary.
- Project managers must have a broad set of skills in order to establish and maintain the necessary partnerships.
- The intense collaboration that is required can lead to burnout.
- There are challenges to gaining access to more advanced technologies.
- Local facilitation is very important.
- It is important to collaborate with learners in the design of materials.
- Print is still the most common technology used in distance education and no less challenging to use than other communications technologies.
- The participants are a major resource.
- Context, time and distance can be major constraints.

Community Learning Networks

Community Learning Networks are another trend in the area of community development and distance learning. While the field of community learning networks is still emerging and has no clear definition, a recent report produced for the Office of Learning Technologies [OLT] (1998) offers the following definition.

> *Community learning networks are community-controlled structures and systems aimed at furthering community development and enhancing the lives of their constituencies by supporting and encouraging lifelong learning. To be relevant, community learning networks must operate within the confines of a geographically circumscribed community defined also as a community of interest. Technologies, including telecommunications technology, may or may not play a central role in community learning networks. When they do, they support and enable either the networking or the learning function, or both (p. 14).*

The OLT report identifies a number of lessons learned about community learning networks that also make sense to us based on our experience. Some of these are summarized below.

- Collaborative partnerships are important.
- There are significant differences in the amount and kinds of resources that partners are able to contribute.
- There is a reduced sense of isolation for participants.
- There are overlapping boundaries between those who learn and those who teach and between those who deliver and those who receive.
- There is a capacity in these kinds of learning opportunities to enhance community development and encourage the development of local talents and skills.
- There is a significant level of community interest in non-formal learning.
- It is important to identify and demonstrate outcomes that are valid to potential funders and supporters (OLT, p. 67-75).

A final word about evaluation and what we learned

We used the following framework to evaluate the action research project.

Objectives	Measures	Documentation
Develop and use an effective action research framework.	Did we ask the right questions? Did we ask them the right way? Were they answered and how well?	Videotaped on-site workshop dialogue and feedback.
Involve communities in making local decisions and recommendations for carrying out this action research project.	How and to what extent were they involved? What kinds of local decision making took place?	Participant mind map inventories of relevant content areas.
Provide opportunities for people to experiment with a range of existing materials, resources, on-site and distance delivery methods.	How were these opportunities provided? To what extent did people take part? To what extent were materials useful & appropriate?	Audio taped teleconference dialogue and feedback.
Identify the leadership, planning, personal management skills, needs and interests of those working in community-based groups and/or volunteering.	Do we know what the needs, interests and priorities are?	Informal dialogue with project participants.
Model participatory and collaborative approaches to community-based program development, design & delivery.	How were community members involved in developing recommendations? To what extent do people see their needs, interests, etc. reflected in Phase 2 plans?	Meetings, list-serve, tele-conferences among project partners.
Develop a plan for the design and delivery of a community capacity-building, leadership & skills development initiative.	Is there a plan for Phase 2?	Project partners focus group. Project documentation.

On the surface we were able to achieve the stated objectives of our action research project. It would be safe to say that most of the people involved in community-based activities in the communities we visited have a strong interest in learning collaboratively both with others in the same community and with people in other communities (See **Style of delivery**, **Linking with other communities**)

(Hallinger, 1997; Peters, 1997; Pincher Creek; Vella, 1994). The project confirmed that the kind of collaborative, non-formal learning format we were proposing is most appealing to communities that are geographically isolated from larger centres and whose community groups - like Recreation Committees - are often overlooked.

Key to the success of this collaborative approach to learning were the ways in which it:

- builds on the existing strengths of the participating communities and individuals because everyone has something of value to offer;
- harnesses both individual and collective power by encouraging participants to develop confidence in their own capacity to do what needs to be done;
- makes it possible for those with low levels of literacy to participate and to contribute ;
- allows participants (including facilitators) with a diversity of backgrounds, culture and experience to learn from each other;
- goes beyond expecting participants to accept existing or dominant ideas about topics like "management" and creates new, shared knowledge amongst participants;
- develops informal networks that continue once the planned learning activities are completed.

As facilitators in contact with various communities and their activities we saw the potential benefits of linking geographically isolated groups who were involved in similar projects and initiatives so that they could share information. (Spronk, 1995; Stiles, 1984). During the action research project we were able to respond to one such request for information by linking two people involved in a unique caribou hair felting project in Northwest River Labrador with people from the Friendship Centre in Rae Edzo who were exploring economic development strategies at the time.

The participants were involved in many different types of community activities. Everyone was dealing with complex issues that are critical to the development of their communities and to addressing numerous social, economic, cultural and political challenges (See **Community context**). Participants also expressed pride in their people, their traditions and their land. At the time of the workshops they identified a number of areas in which they were interested in developing their skills and knowledge including: collaboration, power in groups, leadership, working through conflict, stress management, as well as other related topics (See Topics of Further Interest). It seems likely that the pace of technological change, the trend toward self-government, and external pressures related to globalization – to mention just a few of the pressures facing northern communities – will place ongoing pressure on community groups. Most of these are run by women and they will need to provide

leadership, be accessible and involve more people – all with limited resources. Participants' responses emphasized the importance of applying adult learning principles (Vella, 1994) and problem-based learning strategies (Bawden, 1991; Choi & Hannafin, 1995; Savery & Duffy, 1995; Spronk, 1994). They were clear that any learning initiative would have to be directly and immediately relevant to their needs (See **Usefulness of content**).

Whether or not people are ready to participate depends on the relevance of what's being offered, as well as its accessibility and the amount of resources it would take to participate. Most participants felt the content was relevant to their needs and relatively accessible through the clear language materials, learning circles and resource kits. It was also quite clear that most people, whether they worked within community organizations or community government, were already over-extended. Finding the time to participate in a meaningful way in a learning and capacity-building initiative would be challenging (See **Community context, Interest & Readiness**).

We realize that the readiness question also includes the readiness of our own organizations to carry out a distance learning, capacity-building initiative with community-based groups. For the NWT Literacy Council one of the key messages coming out of the project was the need for them to increase their own network of effective relationships at the community level.

Participants gave us a lot of feedback about appropriate delivery methods, approaches and technologies. We incorporated this feedback into a proposal for another capacity-building initiative. Their feedback also reflected what we knew from our previous experience and what we read in the literature (Fisher, Brillinger & Cantrell, 1993; Spronk, 1995). Some key themes included the importance of using:

- highly interactive on-site as well as distance facilitation strategies;
- face to face contact with the facilitators;
- flexible ways to participate;
- relevant local content;
- meaningful opportunities to connect with others involved in similar activities in other communities;
- clear language materials and graphics.

Communications technologies of all kinds - from reading and writing to teleconferencing, list-serves and beyond - enhance communication in some ways and for some people. They also create barriers. Limited technological infrastructure in remote areas, generally low levels of computer literacy, and learning styles that

require face to face relationships and interdependence (Fisher Brillinger & Cantrell, 1993; Spronk, 1995) mean that any capacity-building initiative linking people in and among isolated communities will have to make creative and effective use of both on-site and distance learning strategies. Distance learning on its own would not be an effective strategy.

We're not sure yet to what extent community participation in action research encourages a sense of ownership and a desire to participate in future delivery. We'll know more about this as we proceed with the next phase of our work.

We needed to be able to do more groundwork in advance of the workshops. This would have enabled us to build better relationships at the local level. Healthy, effective, collaborative relationships between outside facilitators and participants take time to develop and are critical to the success of community development initiatives (Bopp, 1994; MSCG, 1996). It would also have enabled us to design the action research workshop collaboratively with participants, learn more about specific needs within the communities and identify people who would have been able to act as local site-facilitators during the teleconferences. Overall, this would have allowed the action research and any longer term capacity-building initiative to *emerge more clearly from and be more rooted in the context* of each community (Erasmus, 1991; Napoleon, 1992; MSGC, 1996).

Dixon (1995) indicates that community development initiatives are extremely difficult to evaluate because of their inherent degree of complexity. Although we gathered useful information and engaged effectively with many of the project participants, our workshop results feel inconclusive. Our uncertainty about our results is partly because we had to place the research within a larger and longer term community development framework. It is also because we have placed ourselves inside the action research process. The information that we gathered in the workshops and teleconferences did not really surprise us. What we learned about ourselves, our collaboration and about working with communities certainly did.

Bopp (1994) provides one way of understanding the obstacles involved in evaluating participation in non-formal learning and community development processes. He divides these obstacles into three categories.

Socio-cultural obstacles inside the community;
- dependency, lack of confidence;
- an expectation that development is something that is delivered;
- traditional structures that exclude;
- limited local management and leadership skills and capacities;

- the "deprivation trap" (lack of basic necessities, physical weakness, isolation, vulnerability, powerlessness);
- unequal distribution of knowledge and access to resources;
- resources are required to participate;
- participatory processes that are misused or that involve those who manipulate and abuse;
- community may overlook long term issues;
- participation may be used as a rationale for withdrawing resources.

Administrative structural obstacles that affect the community
- a political climate that inhibits involvement;
- tensions between centralized bureaucratic systems and the distribution of power to the margins (rhetoric vs. reality, policy vs. actual program design, top down systems vs. bottom up processes, external influences and requirements).

Facilitative obstacles
- inappropriate role and use of outsiders;
- deciding who the community really is;
- inappropriate attitudes and behaviours of facilitators.

We encountered a number of these obstacles over the course of the action research project and we speculated about the possibility of others. These are as follows.

Socio-cultural	Administrative – structural	Facilitative
Participants' experience of learning largely rooted in models of institutional education and training (school & college-based programs, professional development, etc.). Participants' uncertainty about taking on the role of designers in their own learning. Participation at a busy time takes resources away from groups that are already stretched to the limit. The participation of some powerful individuals may have kept others away.	Unrealistic assumptions by the funder about the capacity of small community organizations to initiate and carry projects without timely support. Extended uncertainty and delays regarding project funding.	Unavoidable and untimely staff changes in mid-stream. Community perception that the NWT Literacy Council is not a provider of this kind of learning initiative.

…communities of practice … are an integral part of daily life and include our family and work life, schooling, and recreational activities. In a profession such as community development, ways of practice develop in community over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise …" (Moore & Hill, 2000)

A major challenge for us throughout this project was the tension between feeling like "collaborators" on the one hand and fulfilling "contractor" and "contractee" roles on the other. This came about because of the way we had to apply the funding framework to a northern, community-based collaboration. The arrangement imposed structural and administrative pressures on us. We talked and tried to feel our way through the complex and overlapping personal, organizational, community and territorial – and other – "ecosystems" that converged inside the boundaries of this project. We learned a lot about the value of what one project team member called "participatory, non-formal learning relationships". We also found it difficult

to communicate to people what it was that we were trying to do. In general, people think about learning as something more formal like going to school or college, or taking a professional development course. We were reluctant to define our work in this way because we did not want people to think that were simply providing "training". That would have misled people about a potential community-based, distance learning initiative. Despite these difficulties some people responded with interest to our invitation to participate.

The NWT and Nunavut Literacy Councils have emerged from the project with a clearer understanding of what's needed in order to encourage the development of community-based literacy initiatives and strengthen the capacity of these initiatives to do what they need to do. The Action Research project allowed us to see our efforts to create non-formal, capacity-building learning opportunities within a larger current and historical context. Finally, it gave us the opportunity to share an emerging vision of a northern, community-based learning network.

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