Case Study December 2004

Community-based Learning Opportunities for

Aboriginals Winner, 2004

Connecting Women in Need with ICT Skills

OVERVIEW

iSisters Technology Mentoring Inc. is a Canadian charitable organization founded in 2001 by a group of teachers who wanted to contribute to their community. iSisters work as mentors to empower women through technology—broadening their career options and access to information in a knowledge-based economy. They partner with local non-profit organizations to build sustainable technology-mentoring programs for targeted learners, especially women in need who would otherwise be unable to access or afford them.

The Tungasuvvingat Inuit Technology Mentoring Program, developed in partnership with the Tungasuvvingat Inuit Community Centre, helps unemployed and underemployed Inuit women obtain technology training that improves their career skills and helps them find jobs.

OBJECTIVES

The program aims to develop and implement a new program for Inuit women focusing on information and communications technology (ICT), employability skills

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The Education and Learning case studies examine outstanding education and learning programs and initiatives. This case study addresses community learning.

Name of Program
iSisters Technology Mentoring Inc.

Date Established
2001

Skills Developed
Information and communications technology
Problem-solving
Critical thinking
Media literacy

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and lifelong learning. The more specific objectives of the program are to:

- Provide technology learning opportunities for unemployed or underemployed Inuit women, with a strong focus on acquiring employability skills;
- Provide a customized technology-based program for its non-profit partner that supports its mission of providing employment and training assistance;
- Encourage lifelong learning and empower Inuit women with broader career opportunities through technological awareness;
- Improve the self-esteem of the participants; and
- Provide real-world experience and the opportunity to apply information and communications technology skills.

TARGET GROUPS

iSisters connects women in need with technology, chiefly through mentoring. The primary learner group targeted by this program is Inuit women facing economic, social or academic barriers. The current non-profit partner organization for the technology-mentoring program is the Tungasuvvingat Inuit Community Centre.

ACTIVITIES

Using a model framework and collaborating closely with each non-profit partner organization, iSisters creates customized technology-mentoring programs. The iSisters program model includes three basic stages of development with key activities linked to each stage:

FOUNDATION ACTIVITIES
- Work with each new non-profit partner organization to develop program objectives, target learner needs and define roles and responsibilities; and
- Sign a partnership agreement which states that the non-profit partner organization will eventually take over the management of the program with support from iSisters.

IMPLEMENTATION ACTIVITIES
- Market the program to targeted learner groups;
- Conduct the program activities; and
- Evaluate individual and overall program success.

SUSTAINABILITY ACTIVITIES
- Look for ways to maintain interest and support for the program on a long-term basis;
- Work with partner agency staff to transfer the knowledge and skills needed to run the learning program independently; and
- Apply for external funding from appropriate agencies.

In the case of the current partner organization, Tungasuvvingat Inuit, seven courses are offered to Inuit women through the Employment Learning Centre. Programs use a blended learning approach that includes on-site teaching, on-line mentoring and self-directed e-learning. Courses cover a variety of ITC and personal management topics, including computer basics, using the Internet for research, word processing, keyboarding and critical thinking skills. Participants can register for courses that run for up to three months, or they can drop in for less formal learning sessions to build skills and then join a more advanced program later. Learning opportunities are provided for all learners, regardless of their level of experience or education.

RESOURCES

Tungasuvvingat Inuit, in partnership with iSisters, received renewable funding from the School Net for Youth Employment Initiative. The Employment Learning Centre, where the program is run, uses new computer hardware, software tools and high speed Internet to support learning and skills development. The computers were donated by IBM, with software provided by the Nectar Foundation, Microsoft Canada and ePals. The furniture was donated by Advanced Business Interiors. The Community Foundation of Ottawa funds the centre, which is open for learning opportunities five days a week.

A certified teacher, with additional qualifications in special education and adaptive technologies, acts as an on-site technology mentor and program designer. An Inuit woman works full-time in the centre, supporting the critical daily functions of the learning program and helping design appropriate courses for the targeted learners. Having an Inuit woman in a leadership role—teaching other Inuit women—inspires the learners to succeed in their own learning and career goals.

INNOVATIONS

Several innovative ideas keep the iSisters technology-mentoring program fresh and relevant for the targeted learner group of Inuit women, and for the partnering organizations that play an important supportive role in the community. The program:

- Provides access to new technologies and learning opportunities on-site, at a community non-profit organization that supports the target group;
- Builds a customized technology-mentoring program based on the specific needs and interests of the learners and clients;
- Uses an Inuit woman in a leadership role to inspire participants;
- Allows learners to progress at their own pace and to use their own preferred learning style;
- Is modified and adapted on an ongoing basis to meet the changing needs of the participants and the host site;
- Uses on-line mentoring to support the non-profit partners as they become responsible for its delivery and sustainability;
- Provides electronic resources and an e-learning environment; and
- Offers customized and innovative on-site classes each week in the Employment Learning Centre.

BARRIERS

There is limited access to technology programs customized to meet the unique needs of Inuit women. In addition to a lack of affordable on-going technology learning opportunities, these women find it difficult to attend learning sessions because of a variety of issues including child care and transportation. As a result, scheduling, access, and funding present significant barriers to participating in traditional information and communications technology programs.

Moreover, many of the learners entering the program have limited or no experience using the Internet or e-mail. Most individuals from the targeted learner group have not completed high school, and have difficulty communicating, orally and in writing, in English. Therefore, literacy and basic skills upgrading must be addressed to facilitate the technology training portion of the learning program.

SOLUTIONS/KEYS TO SUCCESS

There are very real challenges associated with providing accessible technology education to Inuit women in need. The iSisters' program tackles these challenges in practical and responsive ways. It recognizes the needs and abilities of program participants and builds success through:

- Basic Skills Development. The technology-mentoring program is based on the Conference Board's Employability Skills guidelines as well as on the International Society for Technology Education's national education technology standards.
- Mentoring. Inuit learners are coached and mentored by an Inuit woman who understands their cultural background and environment.
- Flexibility. Learners may register for formal classes or attend on a drop-in basis, depending on their learning preferences and availability.
- Access. Learners receive free bus tickets to make it easier for them to get to classes, which are held at a central location, the Employment Learning Centre.
- Sustainability. The partnership agreement with the community organization stresses sustainability and helps move the program toward independence from iSisters.
- Resource Ownership. All program materials and learning resources continue to be available on-line for program partners and learners once iSisters has transferred ownership of the program over to the partner organization.

OUTCOMES

In the program's initial six months, 24 adult learners completed the customized technology-mentoring program and 100 Inuit participated in individual training sessions at the Employment Learning Centre. Formal marketing efforts and word-of-mouth promotion by previous participants has attracted new adult learners, with the program showing a steady increase in the number of participants. In addition to the very positive outcomes for Inuit women participating in the program, the partnering organization has gained new technology and program management skills.

Participating in the program has allowed learners to:
- Improve their employability skills;
- Gain personal confidence when using technology in adaptable, strategic ways;

- Learn how to access and navigate the Internet;
- Measurably improve keyboarding skills;
- Learn to send, receive and manage e-mail using proper netiquette;
- Locate, gather and store information electronically;
- Share information using a range of information and communication technologies;
- Gain word processing skills; and
- Use a range of information and communications technologies to research, produce and communicate information.

Hosting the program has allowed partner organizations to:
- Contribute to the knowledge base of the community;
- Acquire skills and knowledge to use technology strategically in their own organizations; and
- Receive coaching on how to manage an on-site technology-mentoring program.

IMPACTS AND BENEFITS

A number of positive impacts and benefits have resulted from the program:
- The needs of Inuit seeking employment are being addressed;
- For the targeted learner group, new opportunities for learning experiences have levelled the employment playing field;

- Learners gained increased self-esteem and improved employability skills;
- Learners gain and maintain meaningful employment;
- On-site teaching, on-line mentoring support and customized resources are provided to stakeholders in a web-based learning environment;
- Resources created in the technology learning programs are compiled and made available to other learners; and
- Technological expertise is shared with partner organizations.

USE AS A MODEL

The iSisters' e-learning environment, "iTeachnology", is an integral part of providing a sustainable learning program for the partner organizations. The environment allows for all of the learning materials to be made available to program partners and learners on a long-term basis, when the partner organization is leading the program, independent of iSisters. The partnership agreement and the technology learning platform help partner organizations to lead the program to sustainable independence. The e-learning space of "iTeachnology" can be customized and made available to other communities wanting to implement and take ownership of similar learning programs.

About the Education and Learning Case Studies

The Education and Learning case studies examine outstanding education and learning programs and initiatives. The case studies provide in-depth analysis of the methods used to develop, assess, implement and deliver education and lifelong learning in schools, colleges, universities, workplaces and communities. They focus on goals, activities, resource requirements, achievements and outcomes, benefits, innovations, and keys to success and challenges.

This case study addresses the theme of community learning and highlights an award winner from the Community Learning Awards, funded in part by the Office of Learning Technologies, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada.

Community-based Learning Opportunites for Aboriginals Winner, 2004: Connecting Women in Need with ICT Skills by *Alison Campbell*

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