

The South Island Learning Community (SILC) Project

The SILC project was a three-year Community Learning Network initiative funded by the federal Office of Learning Technologies of the then Human Resources Development Canada. The project, which commenced in 2005 and concluded in 2008, took place in Greater Victoria and surrounding area, as defined by the boundaries of the Camosun College region, at the southern tip of Vancouver Island – comprising some 2,500 square kilometers.

There were three core partners: Project Literacy Victoria - a community-based organization that offers free adult basic literacy - that provided project administration; the Songhees Employment Learning Centre of the Songhees First Nation - that served as a laboratory for innovative adult literacy programs with an aboriginal cultural perspective; and the Learning Webs project of Victoria's comprehensive community college, Camosun College - that pioneered adult literacy computer programs. SILC had an evolving number of First Nationⁱ and non-First Nation partners and members who supported the project's goal and objectives.

Organizational partners included the Coast Salish Employment & Training Society (CSETS), the Saanich Adult Education Centre of the Saanich Indian School Board, the Victoria Disability Resource Centre, the Greater Victoria Public Library, the Blanshard Community Centre, the Prostitutes Empowerment Education and Resource Society (PEERS), the Victoria Cool-Aid Society which aids a variety of disadvantaged people, and the Victoria READ Society that offers adult basic education for fee-payers..

Goal

The project's goal was to work within the South Island region to create and test a model for building community capacity (individual and organizational) to enhance adult literacy skills development by appropriate use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT). This model would depend upon building bridges between First Nations and non-First Nations learning communities by creating pathways between formal and non-formal learning providers and the communities, fostering the increase in social capital (trust, networking and shared values)ⁱⁱ by using a variety of social networking and learning technology tools, and fostering a culture of lifelong learning within the project communities and partner organizations. In summary, it was a learning-based community development model that tested the use of

modern learning technologies to enhance both networking and learning within and among participating communities.ⁱⁱⁱ

The SILC aboriginal community animator and exponent of learning technologies to foster adult literacy, Alegha van Hanuse, also worked closely with the First Nations Technology Council (FNTC). The FNTC was created by a First Nations Summit Resolution and works on behalf of all First Nations in BC with a mandate to create a Technology Plan to address issues such as extending broadband to all communities, ensuring that certified technical support is available locally, and working with communities to support the development of user skills so community members can use technology as a tool to improve their personal and community life.

Process

Both First Nations and non-First Nations organizations, communities and nations were initially made aware of how learning and assistive technologies for the disabled could be used to enhance learning opportunities for individuals and groups. They were also encouraged to think of how, through the use of learning technologies, they could better manage their information and knowledge, including ways to revitalize First Nation language and culture. A training of trainers model was initiated for project partners so that each community/organization had at least one person trained in ICT skills who could then teach other individuals, communities and nations.

In order to foster awareness, involvement, understanding and commitment to the SILC project a range of project activities took place, including:

- presentations by the community animators to potential and actual project partners;
- on-site ICT training events;
- e-mail project up-dates; and
- regular project partner advisory meetings.

A three stage formative learning evaluation model which emphasized organizational learning and development was used at twice-yearly intervals to inform the project leaders, workers, and partners on the initiative's progress. The model had been originally tested in a pioneering Australian learning community initiative^{iv} and it was adapted to enable SILC project partners to self-evaluate and reflect upon their individual and associational learning curve along the following stages:

1. From awareness to involvement;
2. From involvement to understanding; and

3. From understanding to commitment.

The formative evaluation reports and the SILC project quarterly report data to the federal government were rolled up to form a summative evaluation report which accompanied the final SILC project report to the federal government.

Tools Used

Where possible, open source technology was used throughout the project. It was used because it does not involve licensing fees or royalties. Also, there is a vibrant and supportive e-community associated with each of these applications. Each has a robust form of technical support "built-in" in the form of discussion forums and documentation websites.

The open source social networking tools which encourage and facilitate networking between individuals, communities and nations included Moodle, Elgg, and Drupal:

Moodle is a learning content management system that allowed learners to take courses online.

Elgg is a social networking, e-portfolio system that many of the community members used as an online repository to store personal identification, resumes, certificates and photos. Some communities also used it to create individual learning plans for continuous learning of their members.

Drupal is a powerful content management system used to build a web site for the Saanich Adult Education Center that allows them to store and share all of their content.

Thus, in an emerging knowledge-based economy and society, increasing numbers of South Island communities were enabled to create a more robust and resilient social and technological infrastructure - and have more of their members acquire the ICT skills which could serve as the foundation for future e-commerce-business, and e-government services.

Some key outcomes/impacts

In addition to attaining its learner participation targets - over 300 learners participated in the project and built their personal e-portfolios. SILC also played a role in influencing a number of previously unanticipated activities in three domains: regional literacy development; First Nation initiatives; and collaboration between First Nations and non-First Nation communities.

Three consequences of this project gradually emerged. The first was the recognition by the project partners that consistent and coherent regional coordination of literacy programs and services - involving

formal and non-formal community-based providers - was needed to identify existing services and gaps. Toward the end of the SILC project the charter meeting of a newly-formed regional adult literacy coordinating committee was held - and the body continues to function. Another result of the SILC initiative was a request by two communities within the region - the town of Sooke, and Saltspring Island - to create adult basic literacy initiatives in their communities.

Finally, the federal government - impressed by the SILC outcomes - approved three projects that had built upon the SILC success. The first was a two-year Community Outreach project initiated in 2008 to foster adult literacy for street people and other disadvantaged populations served by the Victoria Cool-Aid Society. The second was a two-year Workplace Basic Literacy project involving the world-famous Empress Hotel, and a local grocery chain, which commenced in December, 2009. The third was a three-year Aboriginal Basic Literacy project - that commenced in February, 2010 - and is involving five South Island First Nation communities that will help develop and test an aboriginal learning model for creating individual and community learning plans and adult literacy benchmarks.

A series of First Nation initiatives - linked to the SILC project - also occurred. Perhaps, in the long-term, the most important was a decision by the South Island First Nation chiefs to identify adult literacy as a priority following a presentation of the SILC project to their meeting. The decision of the Songhees Nation to successfully launch an adult peer tutoring initiative as well as drafting and concluding an affiliation agreement between the Nation and School District #61 (Greater Victoria) with the assistance of the SILC aboriginal community animator also paved the way for other local bands to plan for similar initiatives. Finally, the Saanich Adult Education Centre - assisted by the SILC community animator - successfully adopted and maintained the Drupal management system.

There is also strong evidence of the positive consequences of collaboration - bridge-building - between First Nation and non-First Nation partners in the SILC. Perhaps the most striking example is the changed policy and practice of the Greater Victoria Public Library which - until 2007 had required a \$300 per person levy for all aboriginal library patrons - a charge which was ironically called "a non-resident fee." Thanks to a presentation by the SILC aboriginal community animator to the Legislative Committee on Adult Literacy which - among other matters - revealed this bizarre situation, an immediate removal of this obstacle to aboriginal access occurred. The Greater Victoria Public Library Board approved, in 2008, a new policy of free access for First Nations people throughout its region and is currently laying plans for development of a First Nations literacy collection and First Nations welcoming space in every library branch. The Victoria READ Society - a SILC partner - has also expanded its program for First Nation people.

Both the Workplace Basic Literacy project and the Aboriginal Basic Literacy project will be administered by Literacy Victoria - the former project involving both First Nation and non-First Nation learners, and the latter being governed by a project committee involving a majority of First Nation representatives.

Summary

The roots of the SILC project were nurtured by the Victoria Learning City initiative which had commenced the year before. As in so many communities which use the lens of lifelong learning to identify and analyze community challenges, it became obvious that unless and until adult basic literacy needs in greater Victoria were met, the prospect of a two-tiered community with an under-class of undereducated adults, often ill-housed, ill fed, and in ill-health - the many consequences of poverty – would become a constant spectre. Simply put, basic literacy for all is the foundation of a resilient learning community. And both learning how to sculpt a partnership of associations from many community sectors as well as to foster participation of the most disadvantaged are key determinants of successfully addressing this literacy challenge.

There is strong evidence that the SILC project has had a truly positive impact on adult basic literacy policy and practice in the South Island - and shown the usefulness of applying learning technologies to enhance literacy provision for individuals and communities

ⁱ We thank the Esquimalt; Lekwungen; Malahat; Pacheedaht; Pauquachin (Saanich); SC?lanew; Tsartlip (Saanich); Tsawout (Saanich); Tseycum (Saanich); and T?Sou'ke Nations for allowing those who were visitors to live and work on their traditional lands.

ⁱⁱ Putnam, R. D. (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York: Simon and Schuster

ⁱⁱⁱ Faris, R. and Peterson, W. (2000) *Learning-Based Community Development*, Victoria: Ministry of Community Development, Cooperatives and Volunteers at <http://members.shaw.ca/rfaris/LC.htm>

^{iv} See Wong, S.,(2004) *The Practice and Progress of Geelong as a Learning City*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, RMIT University, Melbourne. This form of learning-based evaluation was also pioneered by NASA and the International Development and Research Council (IDRC) of Canada.