Honoring What They Say
Part I: Developing the Process Model

Introduction

A basic question, which can be seen as both shallow and deep, both simple and complex, is *What is First Nations research and what should it look like?* Questions of this sort are oceanic in scope, and like the ocean have surfaces and depths. As we contemplate the water, we see only its reflective surface, including our own images. Even though we know that there is an undersea realm masked by reflections, the surface and the upper world seem to be all there is.

The same is true when we are immersed in the water. Because the underside of the water's surface is also reflective, we can be fully aware only of the depths and their contents. The underworld of the sea and its reflective boundary constitute the "known" world. We even see differently under the water because light behaves differently down there.

Research is a cultural, human activity, and like all cultural activities it should proceed from the culture. "Culture" should not be added piecemeal to an imported research methodology. Because "First Nations research" so often begins with a Western majority culture viewpoint, the research process becomes one of interpreting the depths of the ocean while being fully aware only of the surface. Even when we do penetrate the depths, much of their richness is obscured because we are seeing as we would on top of the ocean's surface. Understanding begins when we accept the differences between above and below the water, when we begin to plan research and carry it out from the point of view appropriate to where we are situated.

When contemplating First Nations research, First Nations cultural principles and ways of expression should be predominant.

In many First Nations cultures there is a trickster with special powers to transform itself/himself/herself into human or animal form or into other elements of nature. The trickster, sometimes referred to as a trickster

of learning, travels on many journeys, learning lessons in life. As we think about First Nations research, we can reflect on a story told by Eber Hampton of the Chickasaw Nation about a particular trickster. When he told this story he was talking about the connections between motive and method in research. Eber has given permission to use this story and has encouraged its adaptation—to make it ours. We have renamed the trickster "Old Man Coyote."

> Old Man Coyote had just finished a long day of hunting. He had walked miles and miles that day, over some rough ground. [In Canada, we should be saying "kilometers and kilometers," but somehow that doesn't sound right. "Miles and miles" sounds much better.] It was starting to get dark, so he decided to set up his camp for the night. After supper, he sat by the fire and rubbed his feet. They were tired and sore from the long day's walk. After he rubbed them, he decided to put on his favorite moccasins. He took his favorite moccasins out of his bag and noticed that there was a hole in the toe of one of them. He looked for his special bone needle to mend the moccasin, but couldn't feel it in his bag. [Old Man Coyote was a modern man. He mended his own moccasins.] He tried again, but he couldn't feel or see the needle. So, he started to crawl on his hands and knees around the fire to see if he could find that special needle. Just then Owl came flying by. He landed next to Old Man Coyote. "What are you looking for, my friend?" said Owl. Old Man Coyote said, "I can't find my bone needle, my favorite needle. I can't find it anywhere." Owl said, "I have very good eyes. I'll fly around the fire and look for your needle." Owl made one big swoop around the fire, and said, "I can't see your needle, my friend." "If the needle were around the fire, I would have seen it," he said. "It can't be there." Then Owl asked Old Man Coyote, "Where did you use the needle the last time?" "Oh, quite far away, over in the bushes. I mended my jacket there." Then Owl said, "If you last used it somewhere else, why are you looking around the camp fire?" Old Man Coyote looked at Owl. "Well, it's easier here. The fire gives off a good light and I can see better."

As people concerned with First Nations education and research, we are seeking respectful ways to bring First Nations contexts and research together—to create an appropriate meeting place perhaps. To get to this meeting place we must examine our motives and assumptions, and question our methods, approaches, and practices. We must consider whether our motives and our methods honor and respect First Nations ways. In this report we present our research process as we "sat around our fire" and began our "search for the needles."

Background and Purpose of the Project

In the spring of 1992, the then Ministry of Advanced Education requested the First Nations House of Learning at the University of British Columbia to develop a research study. The study would follow up First Nations

graduates from postsecondary institutions in British Columbia, including universities, colleges, and First Nations-controlled institutions. In response to the Ministry's request, the House of Learning suggested that any research process be grounded in First Nations cultural contexts, yet be responsive to pertinent educational issues in postsecondary institutions. The research process suggested by the House of Learning was intended to result in the development of a First Nations research model piloted in two institutions, the University of British Columbia and one other.

In accordance with this view, the research team decided not to follow typical methodology for studies of this sort: that is, not to send questionnaires to a sample of First Nations graduates from all postsecondary institutions, perhaps followed by a series of interviews. There were two major reasons for this decision:

1. The belief that the scope of variables that influence the extent and quality of postsecondary education is so broad that the validity of findings from this type of methodology would be questionable. Such variables include funding, local community support/involvement, history, and experience of the institution with First Nations peoples.
2. The belief that any First Nations educational research must involve the stakeholders in the design and implementation phases and that they must ultimately benefit from the research experience. This belief implies that, among other principles, the institutions themselves must be involved in any research that is undertaken.

The team felt that we could begin to develop a research model that would address the *substantive questions* of interest to the Ministry relating to:

- the relationship between postsecondary education and employment;
- what factors encourage successful graduation; and
- what barriers and problems were faced by students during their university years, and how they were overcome.

During the research process, a number of issues distinct or unique to First Nations postsecondary education could be addressed (e.g., particular cultural traditions/practices).

Thus the fundamental question and position around which the study was designed was: Are postsecondary programs for First Nations peoples effective? What is the evidence for this? The evidence is the experiences and ideas of the graduates of such programs, before, during, and after attendance/completion of the program.

It was also proposed that the research model developed through the UBC experience would be adapted and piloted with one other postsecon-

dary institution, then shared with any other interested postsecondary institutions in British Columbia. It was felt that these institutions might then adapt the model to their particular educational contexts, use the resulting information for program planning and improvement, and provide the then Ministry of Advanced Education with pertinent data/information regarding access to, and success in, postsecondary education for First Nations peoples.

More specifically, the approach that was taken was to focus on the experiences of graduates from programs at two postsecondary institutions in British Columbia, the University of British Columbia and the Native Education Centre (Vancouver). The study was intended both to reveal substantive findings about these experiences that would be useful to the respective institutions, and to test the research model, which would then be useful to any postsecondary institution wishing to undertake a process of formative evaluation with their First Nations students or graduates.

The project was equally balanced between substantive issues and methodological concerns.

The approach to the study was in its setting and aims consistent with First Nations ways. The approach, the method, and the outcomes of the project were not seen as being "written in stone," but rather entailed discussion and a consensual approach at each stage of the study, in addition to careful scrutiny from a First Nations viewpoint.

The development of the process model began with a consideration of the area of evaluation known as *impact assessment* (Rossi, Freeman, & Wright, 1980). This area of research is directed at establishing with as much certainty as possible whether a program is producing its intended effects. In addition, impact assessment attempts to estimate the magnitude of the effects and to reveal unintended effects (both positive and negative). Finally, impact assessment investigates as much as possible the extent to which the effects were caused not by the program, but by extraneous factors. Such extraneous factors might include maturation processes, social processes, political change, or changes in family status or composition.

Any of a large number of research and evaluation designs are appropriate for impact assessment, including experimental procedures with control groups, quasi-experimental designs, case studies, time series studies, and qualitative methodologies. We felt that a general qualitative/quantitative research design offered a potentially useful approach.

The basic components of the process model as initially delineated are similar to the six stages of any research or evaluation project. Indeed, it is difficult to conceive of any research without these major stages. The components included:

1. deciding about the questions to be answered;

2. deciding about populations and samples of former students, as well as the definitions of such terms as *First Nations*;
3. deciding about methods of gathering information from the students and about relevant data/measures;
4. deciding on a data gathering and analysis timeline;
5. gathering and interpreting the information; and
6. communicating the research and its results to others.

Because of the basic approach of the study, the research design also entailed at every stage a questioning process among the members of the research team, which was centered on the question *Is this appropriate in the First Nations context?* For example, when deciding about relevant data and measures, the important First Nations value of respect for people's privacy came to the fore. Each potential question for the survey form was examined closely before being included, that is, if no precise reason for its inclusion could be conceptualized, that particular data item was discarded.

As becomes evident below, the First Nations nature of the research and the process model may be found in the details of the procedure and the interpretation of the findings rather than in the general set of components.

It seemed reasonable to us that in the case of postsecondary education the impact on the students is long term, and in all likelihood starts when the students first decide to attend their particular programs. Thus both the substantive concerns of the Ministry and the process model we wished to develop would fit into this area of formative evaluation. Because of the long-term nature of the impact, the experiences of the graduates both during and after program completion were relevant.

It also seemed reasonable to accept the view that in this case the most appropriate and valid measures of impact were the students' own accounts, their stories. Their stories would also reveal other valid measures of impact such as their present employment status. Finally, in keeping with the methodological principle of triangulation, it seemed desirable to gather the stories in more than one way. As is described below, a mailed questionnaire and a special form of group interview—the focus group—were the methods we chose to test.

Because of the need to limit the scope of the project, we decided to focus on those who had completed programs, the graduates.

It is evident from the above discussion that the result of our deliberations was a process model: a flexible procedure rather than a fixed rigidity,

an organic entity, adaptable and once again consistent with the principles of respect and honor that are basic to the traditional teachings of First Nations peoples. The research process when viewed from this perspective becomes a dialogue that is growth-oriented rather than static, and that allows the central place of such other fundamental First Nations principles as spirituality and a sense of community.

It is evident as well that the study was rooted in the traditions of the ancestors of BC's First Peoples; throughout the study we tried to respect those traditions. By acting in ways that were in accord with First Nations principles, we hoped to ensure that the research process and model would facilitate the empowerment of First Nations peoples, as well as giving graduates an opportunity to share their experiences. By such sharing the graduates will help those who enroll in postsecondary programs in the future: the younger brothers and sisters of the "postsecondary family." Giving assistance in this way is in perfect accord with the important First Nations principle of giving back to the family and community.

However, it is equally evident that the research project did entail a number of steps that, in general, conformed to accepted academic practice, including a review of literature, submission of the proposal for ethical review, testing the research process, and sharing the results of the project. It is important to remember, however, that each was examined for conformity to First Nations principles, and adaptations were made if necessary.

Parts II through V of this report contain the detailed description and findings of each stage of the project, and the literature review is found in Parts VI-VII. A summary of these sections follows.

A Summary of the Literature

An extensive literature review was undertaken that not only included the published literature on First Nations postsecondary education (primarily in North America), but also a survey of fugitive literature and dissertations or theses. In addition, the literature discussing each of two methodologies (i.e., survey research and focus group research) was reviewed with special reference to the applications of these methods to the First Nations context. The full text of the literature review may be found in Parts VI-VII, as well as a full list of references cited and other relevant material which comprises Part VIII. The brief summary below is adapted from this section.

The literature confirmed the belief that the participation rate of First Nations peoples in higher education is less than 20% of the rate of the general population, and at the undergraduate level more than 70% of First Nations students who start a program do not complete it, as compared with a completion rate of over 70% in the general population of university students (*Student Flows*, 1993). This situation, however deplorable, reflects

a dramatic change since the 1960s, when the participation rate was close to zero. Significant changes since the 1970s have included:

- a current attendance rate of more that 80% of First Nations children in provincially established schools, rather than federal schools;
- the establishment of hundreds of First Nations-controlled schools;
- the establishment in all regions of Canada of special university-based programs, first in education and law and in preparatory programs, and now in other areas such as the health professions; and
- the establishment of tertiary institutions by some First Nations communities.

The literature identifies several factors associated with success or attrition at university. A major factor is the nature of the K-12 school system. Barriers to success found at both pre- and postsecondary levels may include:

- teachers or faculty with low expectations of First Nations students;
- an unresponsive curriculum inappropriate for building the academic skills of First Nations peoples;
- lack of, or inappropriate, career and academic counseling; and
- the personal and systemic experience of racism.

Other major factors are financial support for university studies, family and peer support, institutional climate, and institutional support. The literature indicates that postsecondary services work best when both teaching and nonteaching staff are themselves members of a First Nation.

As one part of the process of surveying the literature, a survey of postsecondary institutions was completed. The intent of the survey was to identify of the fugitive literature: in-house and other unpublished studies of First Nations educational programs. Of the 250 institutions to which questionnaires were sent, 78 (36%) responded. The form contained four questions that were answered Yes or No, in addition to two questions requesting a written response and a space for other comments.

The 78 institutions responded to the Yes/No questions as follows:

1. *Has your institution or program completed a follow-up study of First Nations graduates?*

Yes:	17	(21.8%
No:	59	(75.6%
No response:	2	(2.6%)

2. *Has your institution or program completed an evaluation (either internal or external) that includes measures or indicators of First Nations students' success or attrition?*

Yes:	24	(30.8%)
No:	51	(65.4%)
No response:	3	(3.8%)

3. *Has your institution completed any kind of assessment of First Nations students' educational needs in your area, or any study of institutional effectiveness relative to First Nations students?*

Yes:	30	(38.5%)
No:	28	(35.9%)
No response:	20	(25.6%)

4. *If you have responded "yes" to any of the above questions, are the reports accessible?*

Yes:	27	(34.6%)
No:	23	(29.5%)
No response:	28	(35.9%)

With regard to the two write-in questions and the miscellaneous comments made, the 78 institutions gave the following responses:

1. *Do you know of other studies/literature that might be useful?*

Twenty-four institutions made a comment in this section of the form. In general they fell into one of three areas: references to programs, boards, or institutions (8 comments); references to individuals (6); and references to reports or published literature (10). The references to programs, boards, or institutions included the American Indian Education Consortium, Fraser Valley College, Lakehead University, the Metis and Piegan Nations, the University of Calgary, the California State Universities (2 comments), and the Southwest Indian Training Committee.

The six references to individuals were general suggestions of people known to have worked in the area (i.e., to have completed some study that the respondent felt was relevant, such as a program evaluation). They included university faculty (3), DIAND (1), and First Nations-controlled school boards (3).

Of the 10 references to reports or literature, one person merely noted that many studies were available, and a second respondent commented that many INAC and UN documents were available. A further two referred us to a report or bibliography. Of the remaining six respondents, two referred us to published journal articles in the *Journal of American Indian Education* and the *Journal of Indigenous Education*. The final four responses included references to specific reports.

2. *Do you have any other suggestions that might help us?*

Twenty-two institutions responded to this request. Five comments were referrals to specific people the respondents felt might serve as informants or resource persons. Of the remaining 17, five were "miscellaneous." One person simply endorsed the need for a study such as ours, another gave us the name of a consulting firm, and a third noted that there were no UBC graduates in their area. A fourth respondent said that their institution did not identify First Nations students or graduates. The fifth person asked for a copy of our study when it was completed.

Six of the 12 remaining responses were referrals to literature or to institutional activity. Of the six, two referred us to an institutional history that "might" be available and to an internal DIAND survey of First Nations students. A third person referred us to ERIC files, and two others noted that their institutions were doing some form of study or review of First Nations students. The sixth noted that their institution did some yearly follow-up of graduates.

The remaining six responses were suggestions about the conduct of the study, including a recommendation that students be contacted (3 respondents) and a suggestion that daily contact with students be made. One suggested that "social counselors" be asked to participate, while the final respondent suggested that participatory evaluation would be worthwhile.

Other Comments
Just under one half (i.e., 36) of the 78 institutions had some additional comments or enclosures. Nine sent documents with their responses. For example, the Carrier-Sekani Tribal Council sent copies of an educational assessment study they had completed in 1986 and a directory of educational resources for their area (Brown, 1986a, 1986b; 1987). The enclosures are discussed in the full literature review found in Parts VI and VII.

A further 11 institutions noted that studies were available. One institution asked for a formal request for the report. Four noted that such studies were unavailable, and one respondent commented that their studies were out of date. Finally, five institutions stated that their studies of students were ongoing, four others gave contact names and addresses, and five wished to share our findings when we had completed the study.

General Comments
It is evident from the above results that only about one third of the postsecondary institutions who responded to the request for information have conducted follow-up studies of First Nations students, studies of success factors or barriers, or needs assessments. Judging from the results of the survey, and the literature review in Parts VI and VII, it appears that the present study may add to the knowledge base in the area of First Nations postsecondary education.

Project Methodology

This section outlines the general approach and methodological plan. More specific details of the methodology as used at the two postsecondary sites are briefly summarized below. The detailed descriptions are to be found in the sections on the UBC and the Native Education Centre experiences respectively. The plan for the workshop/symposium, during which the research project and process model were presented to interested postsecondary institutions, may be found in Part IV.

As outlined above, the basic components of the process model as initially delineated were:

1. deciding about the questions to be answered;
2. deciding about populations and samples of former students, as well as the definitions of such terms as *First Nations*;
3. deciding about methods of gathering information from the students and about relevant data/measures;
4. deciding on a data gathering and analysis timeline;
5. gathering and interpreting the information; and
6. communicating the research and its results to others.

These six steps were adapted for the present research project. The formulation and testing of the initial model at the University of British Columbia included:

1. adopting the three interests of the Ministry as the questions of interest (i.e., the relation of employment to education, success factors, and barriers);
2. deciding to survey the entire population of First Nations graduates, across all programs and all years, the term *First Nations* to be defined broadly;
3. deciding to use two major methods of data collection: the quantitative/qualitative mailed survey and the focus group, with limited use of a third method, telephone interviews; the survey would ask for both forced and open choices; the focus group questions would be based in part on the results of the surveys;
4. deciding to use two mailouts and personal contact to maximize return rates of questionnaires, and two different focus groups, with two different methods of analysis for the focus group transcriptions; and
5. deciding to communicate the initial results and utility of the process model to the other postsecondary institution initially, and then to any interested postsecondary institution during the sharing day; this day to be followed by a report both for the then Ministry of Advanced Education and for general distribution.

Because of the basic approach of the study, it is important to remember that the research design also entailed at every stage a questioning process among the members of the research team, which was centered on the question *Is this appropriate in the First Nations context?* Because of the focus given to such considerations, it is evident that the research design itself is exploratory, as are the findings discussed below.

The Site Experiences: A Preview

Parts II and III of this report give in considerable detail the findings of the UBC experience and the experience of the Native Education Centre.

As we digest the findings from the two sites, it becomes evident that the process model does indeed have potential as a formative evaluation/impact assessment device; and that the findings directly address the three interests of the then Ministry of Advanced Education: education/employment relationship, success factors, and barriers.

With regard to the UBC graduates, most of the respondents were graduates of the Faculty of Education; about 70% were women. They identified most closely with a large number of First Nations from across North America. The graduates saw a clear division between First Nations family, friends, and First Nations students' services, and other UBC and community services: of 137 named sources, 119 specifically focused on First Nations people, institutions or UBC. First Nations agencies (especially NITEP and Ts'kel, which appear to have impact beyond their program mandates). It is clear from the questionnaire responses that the participants' First Nations cultures had a major impact on their UBC experiences; virtually all of this impact was positive.

The first barrier may be the respondents' initial perceptions of the university: about 70% of the questionnaire respondents recalled their first few months at UBC in negative or neutral terms. A second barrier is lack of funding or inadequate levels of funding. Problems are often barriers to success: the questionnaire respondents included 170 problems or obstacles, 98 of which were some personal issue or characteristic. Negative perceptions of UBC as an institution constitute another potential barrier. The questionnaire respondents felt that, on the whole, UBC as an institution was somewhat more discouraging than encouraging.

A major barrier discussed at length by the focus group participants was racism in various contexts and forms. Some incidents took the form of belittling persons or cultures; some were depersonalizing incidents of tokenism and assuming that First Nations programs and achievements were inferior to those of the majority culture. The legacy of past discrimination and racism had present impact as well.

All but five of the respondents reported no difficulty in finding employment, almost always in the field in which they had studied. In general the respondents have broadened their work horizons in their field of training, and/or have assumed progressively more responsibility in the field of training. Two thirds of the group are working in a First Nations context.

An outcome of the UBC experience likely to have both a direct and an indirect effect on employment is the impact of UBC on the graduates' First Nations identity. For 53/67 questionnaire respondents, that impact was positive, but not everything reflected positively on the institution. Per-

sonal growth, another outcome of the UBC experience with both direct and indirect effects on employability, was revealed in a number of the questionnaire respondents' statements about UBC's influence. In a general way it can be seen as the result of focus on the individual as agent in his/her own education. Negative personal growth was rarely reported.

In the NEC testing it appears that the model itself is sufficiently adaptable to be of use to a postsecondary institution that is very different in its goals and student population from UBC. During this collaborative venture, however, some limitations of the process model became evident, including the low return rate of the questionnaires, the problems of adapting the form for use by other institutions, and the difficulties inherent in interpreting and reporting results by people who understand their own context well but are to some extent unfamiliar with the research enterprise.

Although most NEC graduates heard about the Centre from private individuals, it was primarily the institutional characteristics of the NEC that respondents listed as influencing their decision to attend: the decision revolved around two broad factors: relevance-accessibility and First Nations milieu-identity (each of which operates, of course, in the context of the other). A major aspect of accessibility is the comfort level students felt, even on first entering the Centre, while another is the desire to learn about First Nations heritage and to be with other First Nations people. Other factors involved included the wish to learn and pass the learning on to others, a commitment to First Nations children, and a wish to benefit the community at large.

Success factors likely to have been influential include the comfort felt at the NEC; support from friends and family, staff, and other students in NEC; the atmosphere of the Centre; the First Nations identity of the NEC; relevance of course and program content; the possibility of taking successive programs; course/program quality; and the personal qualities of instructors and staff. All these factors would operate together, interacting with each other to create a context for learning and success for First Nations students. Barriers experienced by the respondents included funding and/or limited finances. For some respondents, responsibilities or perceived problems were likely to have been barriers: family responsibilities, financial responsibilities and problems, and personal situations, specific problems with staff, perceived lack of information, and "lack of responsibility" of fellow students (a measure of academic climate in one particular class, perhaps), lack of day care and transportation problems.

The connection between education at the NEC and employment is clear: virtually all the responding graduates are either employed in some area close to that of their training, or are engaged in new educational ventures, again for the most part in their area of training. In addition, the NEC is serving as a source of renewed affiliation with First Nations,

strengthening the sense of community and teaching a renewed appreciation for First Nations values. Awareness of First Nations issues and of present situations were also mentioned. This increasing awareness and affiliation with First Nations is likely to act indirectly on graduates' employability, as is the increased sense of personal power reported by the graduates, which entails increased confidence, self-esteem, determination, and increased forming of positive social ties.

The research project and the process model were described during the daylong workshop/symposium. The comments by the workshop participants focused on a number of specific details of the research process, limitations and aspects of the research methodology and the process model, and the redefinition of the research process to fit community needs. Comments made after the workshop/symposium were generally positive. The participants felt that the structure was comfortable and that the process model was useful and applicable. The few negative comments tended to focus on details of arrangements or the process and its findings. Interest in future workshops was high, with a number of topics being suggested.

References

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