

# Acting Across Boundaries in Aboriginal Curriculum Development: Examples from Northern British Columbia

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*In accordance with its institutional mandate, the University of Northern British Columbia has entered into partnerships of various types with both rural and urban Aboriginal communities. This article describes the processes of building partnerships between Aboriginal communities and the University at the levels of both institutions and persons. We argue that the success of these collaborations has been enhanced by overtly participatory methodologies, but recognize that these methodologies have been constrained by factors outside the collaboration process. We suggest that successful participatory partnerships must begin with a process of communication where all parties outline their assumptions, limitations, and objectives. Claims by non-First Nations researchers and institutions engaged in participatory processes to be disinterested or simply facilitating the goals of the Aboriginal Nations with whom they work run the risk of continuing colonial relationships rather than eroding such relationships through participatory processes.*

## *Introduction*

The development of curricula to meet the needs of Canada's Aboriginal communities is a matter of urgency for a number of entities operating in the country's current political context (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972; Assembly of First Nations, 1988). Foremost among the agents attempting to facilitate the development of such curricula are, of course, Aboriginal Elders, leaders, and experts themselves (Barman, Hébert, & McCaskill, 1987). A further range of participants drawn largely from the country's postsecondary institutions are also involved in a number of capacities (Battiste & Barman, 1995). In this article we explore some of the challenges of bringing together institutions rooted in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities for the purposes of creating responsive and appropriate curricula. We do so by way of an extended description and analysis of activities centered on the University of Northern British Columbia. We suggest that a key element in transcending existing colonial relationships is overt recognition of the mutual autonomy of the communities involved in the process of developing the curricula. Collaborative curriculum devel-

opment is in this regard much like other participatory relationships that are being explored in a variety of other contexts.

### *Participatory Research and Participatory Curriculum Development*

Although it takes many different forms, participatory research begins with the need to ensure that the privilege of knowledge (i.e., the capacity to know, describe, and analyze any problem or set of problems) is diffused (Reason, 1994). Rather than acting as if external agents armed with the tools of positivistic science could observe, test, and report on a particular problem, a participatory approach assumes that the definition of a research question is the first step in providing pertinent answers. In a participatory paradigm the methods employed are designed to make sure that community members are actively involved both as participants and as agents of research programs.

Participatory methods are also based on the premise that the product *and* the process of research must benefit the community. Researchers attempt to involve the community in all phases of the research process: from the conception of what is urgent, to how a problem is defined and how it is researched, to the final product of the research and the use of these results. Such methods are intended to move the power inherent in the production of knowledge into the hands of the community. A number of potential benefits result from this, not the least of which is an informed and empowered community. Participatory methods are advocated by many applied researchers. In particular, feminist researchers (Maguire, 1987; Mies, 1983) and many researchers working with indigenous communities (Ryan, 1995; Robinson, Gavin, & Hodgson, 1994; Warry, 1990, 1992) have advocated participatory research methods because of the potential to diffuse the power relations inherent in the production and dissemination of knowledge (see Haraway, 1988, for a general discussion).

Yet problems remain in moving from intention to implementation in participatory research. One serious limitation lies in the nature of the relationship between the community and the researchers. Intentions aside, researchers often enter research relationships with particular kinds of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). University-based researchers usually hold advanced degrees and have privileged access to external resources and communication methods and tools understood by mainstream institutions. So in practice, participatory approaches are susceptible to unbalanced power relations, and a kind of paternalism can emerge where the leadership roles fall to the researchers. Where the participants in a research coalition are subsumed into a framework where one collective voice emerges, such a voice can be one that speaks *for* the community, although not necessarily being *of* the community. This is clearly not always and everywhere the case, but it remains a problem for all who attempt to work in a participatory framework.

One solution—and a strategy we have increasingly advocated at UNBC—is to form relationships with Aboriginal communities and their institutions that are based on the explicit recognition of mutual autonomy. Not only is this consistent with the overall political goals of many Aboriginal nations (i.e., for political autonomy and self-determination), but it acts as a barrier to the assimilative incorporation of Aboriginal partners into the University's agenda. The University does not constitute the particular members of the community who will actively participate. Preexisting institutions in the community form the locus from which the participatory relationship is built. The intention is to collaborate with Aboriginal communities while resisting tendencies toward co-optation and incorporation. At the most mundane level a key element in the realization of this intention is the recognition that the University, like the communities with which it works, has a set of goals and objectives of its own. This is arguably the case in all participatory relationships. It is certainly the case in the collaborations that involve UNBC, because one primary aspect of the mandate of the University is to serve Aboriginal communities. Meeting this mandate is part and parcel of the success of the institution, and such success is directly related to access to resources over the long term.

We believe that participatory curriculum development needs to take place through a process that recognizes and embraces relationships of autonomy rather than the elimination of such boundaries. Without the acceptance of mutual but distinct interests, the potential for institutional assimilation is great. Canadian history is littered with projects undertaken for Aboriginal people that instead turned out to be for the dominant society. Some might well claim that the Canadian state has often perceived itself to be acting to the benefit of Aboriginal peoples (the residential school system is one glaring example), much to the detriment of generations of Aboriginal people and communities. The call for autonomy by Aboriginal peoples arises from just this history. Research relationships need to recognize and act on these realities, but not by instituting a new—albeit kinder and gentler—form of colonialism. Participatory research relationships built around the denial of interest, goals, and power on the part of the researchers run such a risk. Research partnerships need to be based on mutual autonomy and respect if the vestiges of colonial relationships are to be overcome (Graham & McDonald, 1997; McDonald & Graham, 1998). In what follows we report on our progress to this end in the hope that the lessons we have learned may be instructive to others engaged in similar work.

### *UNBC'S Approach*

To understand the approach taken by the University of Northern British Columbia, it is important to note that UNBC opened as an entirely new facility in the summer of 1994 with an explicit mandate to serve northern

communities. A crucial direction in UNBC's innovative programming is the area of Indigenous studies, or First Nations studies, and the institutional desire to make the University a place for Aboriginal people.

UNBC's operations reflect the fact that the institution deals with Aboriginal people both as individuals and as members of communities. Although the factors involved here are not entirely separate, we attempt to engage Aboriginal individuals as students in the University community and Aboriginal communities as partners in the construction and delivery of courses. There is obviously overlap: Aboriginal persons at UNBC are often active members of both the University and their home community. Nonetheless, when talking about our activities it is necessary to bear in mind that although much of what we do is focused on Aboriginal persons, not all these activities are directly mediated through Aboriginal communities. This is a reflection of the wider political context in which Aboriginal persons participate in both their own nations and the institutions of the wider Canadian state. In addition, one of the roles the University has in the building of northern BC is the facilitation of cross-cultural communication, learning, and understanding. To this end the vast majority of our initiatives, even when guided by Aboriginal communities, engage a varied cross-section of our catchment population.

In recognition of the importance of innovative programming in the area of Aboriginal education, UNBC has promoted a three-pillar response. One pillar is the Office of First Nations Programming (OFNP), which offers student support of various kinds and operates the First Nations Centre (FNC). Another pillar consists of the many courses dealing with Aboriginal issues offered in many different programs (e.g., anthropology, biology, English, nursing, political science, social work). Aboriginal studies are intended to permeate UNBC and not be ghettoized. The third pillar, which is the focus of this article, is the First Nations Studies Program (FNST) with responsibilities for providing specific courses relevant to the extraordinarily diverse Aboriginal nations in the UNBC area. FNST places special emphasis on creating opportunities for students to learn directly from Aboriginal people. This includes courses taught in Aboriginal communities, internships, and community-based research projects for undergraduate and graduate students.

### *Streams*

Briefly, the FNST curriculum has three emphases or streams: Aboriginal languages, cultures, and issues. The issues stream consists of courses dealing with theoretical, methodological, and contemporary issues. The strong community orientation underlying the FNST approach to curriculum is especially apparent in the issues stream. By way of example, our community-based research course has involved UNBC students on practical projects with the Lheidli T'enneh First Nation Administration, and our internship courses have involved undergraduate and graduate

students working on practical projects with Aboriginal communities throughout the north.

Courses in the culture and language streams employ curricula specific to the individual Nations<sup>1</sup> in UNBC's area. This is a particularly innovative area because with few exceptions it has not been attempted before. Few of the languages and cultures in the north have been taught formally in any intensive manner, much less at the university level, and all lack adequate resource materials for curriculum development and delivery. In most cases even basic information must be developed before we can assemble course materials. The curricula currently being delivered, developed, or refined include courses for six languages (Carrier, Cree, Witsuwit'in, Haisla, Tsimshian, and Nisga'a) and five cultures (Carrier, Metis, Witsuwit'en, Tsimshian, and Nisga'a). In time we wish to expand the list of culture and language course offerings to include all the languages and cultures of northern BC—more than a dozen in total.

### *Community Participation*

An important aspect of FNST curriculum development is community participation. Many complex issues are associated with developing and delivering Aboriginal curriculum, including the appropriation of community knowledge into courses and the voice of presentation in the classroom. One of our approaches to these issues is to maximize the classroom participation of Aboriginal Elders, experts, and other spokespersons. Another is collaborative curriculum development and delivery. For either approach to work well FNST must assume the principles of community ownership and control; however, the contradiction is that we are also bound by standards and principles held by the University. Herein lie fundamental difficulties for articulating the institution and the community. To overcome these and to create noncolonial relationships with the Aboriginal communities, we predicate the collaboration on the overt recognition of the mutual autonomy of both the Aboriginal communities and the University. Two key tools for the collaborative work are the co-instructor model and the community curriculum development model.

The co-instructor model directly addresses this contradiction by teaming community experts with university experts in the classroom. Responsibility for the course is shared according to the experience of the community expert with university-level curriculum and of the academic with the community. An even balance may occur between co-instructors, but ideally the model is developmental, training the community expert to become the sole instructor. This latter situation results as the community expert gains experience with university traditions and classroom teaching. Our experience with co-instruction has been varied and partly dependent on preexisting community resources. The Haisla and Carrier language courses began with an academic linguistic expert assisted by community experts acting as teaching assistants. The Tsimshian language courses

were more of a balance and, finally, the Nisga'a courses have been taught mostly by qualified Nisga'a instructors.

Our success in transferring course responsibility to the community-based co-instructor has been mixed. In most courses the co-instructor is not advancing quickly. For example, after four years of Carrier Language Levels 1 and 2, no co-instructor is yet ready to take over the course. Three reasons for this are the problem of retaining community experts over the long term, the limited training resources for university teaching, and general resource-related problems that interfere with long-term continuity. An exception to this pattern is the Metis studies program. After an initial period of course development, one cycle of course delivery, and subsequent revisions, responsibility for the courses shifted from the academically trained co-instructor to the community-based co-instructor (who now acts as the sole instructor). We need to find better, more reliable ways to transfer instructional responsibility to the community. To this end we are discussing better ways to develop community experts, for example, by documenting that development with a co-instructor portfolio and by seeking ways to provide training.

Underlying these challenges remains the contradiction of articulating Aboriginal pedagogical traditions to those of universities, here expressed as the requirement that University teachers hold advanced degrees. Our options are that either we must work toward the general acceptance of the knowledge and experience of our Aboriginal partners as equivalent to traditional university qualifications, or we must wait for the pool of interested and university-qualified Aboriginal instructors to grow. The most likely and constructive response is probably a combination of these two options. Meanwhile, our co-instructor model has facilitated movement toward increasing the direct participation of community members as instructors within the program. There is some ambivalence here, as in practice this model can have an assimilative direction, itself rooted in the principal contradiction between Aboriginal autonomy and the desire of Aboriginal communities and individuals to undertake training that accesses the dominant society.

The second major tool we are developing to articulate the community and the institution in a noncolonial manner is community-based curriculum development. We adopted the collaborative approach as most applicable for developing and delivering culturally appropriate curriculum with Indigenous communities undergoing social, cultural, and intellectual decolonization. Yet, again, we must deal with the contradiction of providing a type of education based on the university credit system, which as a consequence contains institutional limits that must be recognized and met. Because this contradiction lies on highly charged political ground, the more clarity we can bring to the work the faster we can progress; hence our methodology of acknowledging the separate

needs of both partners. To begin with we must specify and clarify any limitations that exist as acknowledged bottom-line assumptions for the community and UNBC.

To facilitate the articulation process, FNST is developing a consultation model based on a six-step process and a set of guidelines. These state the underlying assumptions FNST must use, outline a process to explicate the requirements of the community and of UNBC, and provide a basis for articulating UNBC and the community.

To understand what we are trying to accomplish it is important to keep in mind that even in the best of circumstances curriculum development is a difficult task. Here we are dealing with numerous contradictions created by the decolonization of Aboriginal education and the desire of Aboriginal people and communities to participate more fully in an institution like the university (Haig-Brown, 1995; Battiste & Barman, 1995; Barman et al., 1987). In the context of culture courses, for example, two questions that immediately arise are "Why would an Aboriginal community agree to accept the premise that 'university standards,' whatever they may be, are germane?" and "Why should a culture or language course be offered for university credit?" The answers to these questions are varied and conditioned by the multiple objectives of the communities and the University. In a given situation the community participants might desire (a) the placement of Aboriginal culture on a par with courses focused on European cultures; (b) the ability to ensure that Aboriginal students training to serve their home communities have access to, and receive recognition for, knowledge of their own culture; and (c) a structured forum for the teaching and learning of aspects of Aboriginal cultures that has little or nothing to do with the university or postsecondary education system at all. In fact UNBC operates under the assumption that the first two of these objectives are valuable and attainable and that the third is not in direct contradiction to the first two. This institutional assumption is not necessarily valid in all situations. Nonetheless, our general intentions are to meet both community goals and university goals at the same time. In part we do this through processes that facilitate the clear articulation of the goals of the various parties involved (Warry, 1990).

#### *Guidelines to Curriculum Development*

Two basic assumptions UNBC brings into the process are, first, that UNBC credit courses should be transferrable to any other universities and therefore must meet a standard appropriate to all universities, and, second, that students must be registered through the UNBC registration process. Both assumptions are manifestations of institutional control and expressions of university culture that can be in contradiction to community values and thus create problems for the community. We have not always been able to reconcile community guidelines with those of the university system. Registration, for example, is a process embedded in bureaucratic culture

that requires advance acceptance (admission) into the university, often months in advance, followed by proper registration into courses in accordance with whatever stipulations may be defined for any particular course (e.g., prerequisite course or other limitations, including those recommended during curriculum development).

In part the guidelines in our curriculum development document come from the requirement that UNBC course offerings be at a “university level.” These guidelines address five main areas of concern: teaching qualifications, ownership of materials, standards, delivery format, and evaluation methods.

1. The University requires properly qualified faculty, which normally means personnel have a doctorate or a nearly completed doctorate when they are hired. A master’s degree may be acceptable under special circumstances, but someone with postgraduate qualifications is expected to take part in any curriculum development initiative. This excludes most Elders, those with expertise credited by community standards. Institutional acknowledgement of this contradiction permits argumentation for hiring community-based instructors that is premised on the need to match university standards and community standards. Although we might wish it were otherwise, working in the university structure requires dealing with colleagues and administrators who do not always share the desire to promote the decolonization process as outlined here.
2. Ownership of information that is used in a UNBC course is a matter of concern for some community people who do not want curriculum development to become another means for outsiders to appropriate community knowledge and expertise. The University, however, does not copyright or otherwise require extensive control over course materials. Although it does require course outlines that can be used and disseminated freely, the specific information that is required need not compromise community concerns over intellectual property rights. The University does not require ownership of curriculum content or teaching materials that are developed by a community for use in a course; it requires only a means of arranging access.
3. The University requires that university-level standards be maintained for course content. This is discussed elsewhere.
4. The typical UNBC course normally involves a minimum of 39 contact hours, which may conflict with more experientially oriented pedagogical practices. The conflict can be acknowledged through more flexible course delivery schedules that move away from the traditional weekly class schedule or rigid semester system.
5. Methods of evaluation are typically defined by the university grading system. This can conflict with community systems that, for example, do not recognize failure. Existing options in the University system

can be identified and co-opted to provide more appropriate ways of reporting evaluation, for example, grades that are not included in calculating grade point averages, including the passing grade and the audit.

Embedded here are some of the principal ambiguities in the development of contemporary, community-driven Aboriginal studies programs in a university context. There is a deep tension, but identifying and acknowledging the institutional requirements and limits allows for creative solutions that maximize satisfying community requirements.

### *Six Steps of Collaborative Curriculum Development*

Another tool we have developed is our "Six Steps Towards Collaborative Curriculum Development." Each step is part of the participatory approach of transferring control. These guidelines differentiate the development process into initiation, planning, development, implementation, evaluation, and expansion. The process is similar to those used elsewhere (Archibald, 1995).

*Step 1 (Initiation)* involves one or more informal meetings with the Elders and leaders of the community to set direction and to identify five fundamental goals: (a) the community's needs and wishes (cultural or linguistic recovery, development of cultural pride, articulation with formal institutions, funding, other); (b) a set of principles to guide the process (e.g., community control, experiential learning, Aboriginal pedagogy); (c) sources of information for the course and, if new information must be actively researched, how that research will occur; (d) relevant University guidelines and limits (e.g., types of courses and programs, accreditation issues, standards issues); and (e) community guidelines.

*Step 2 (Planning)* begins with the establishment of a central committee to provide support and guidance. The committee is critical, and consideration must be given to cultural as well as bureaucratic issues when establishing its composition (e.g., it should include Elders, representatives for community institutions, students and/or parents, education workers, curriculum development resource people from within or outside the community, other resource people) and its structure. This committee needs to be well positioned to establish effective and appropriate communication between all partners and to develop appropriate support and advisory groups. The committee works on identifying culturally appropriate channels for community control over the curriculum process, identifying staffing and other organizational needs, establishing a work team with a mandate and appropriate reporting process, conducting a learning needs assessment that will give direction to curriculum development, and funding the project.

In *Step 3 (Curriculum Development)* the committee establishes a curriculum model appropriate to its pedagogical philosophy and objectives. This requires identification of the instructional topics and any significant

development and implementation issues that need attention (e.g., recording information, ethical issues, research methods, or copyright issues). The goal is a draft of the curriculum that will be used, but as already indicated, FNST curriculum development usually requires active research to develop basic information. This can be a time-consuming task requiring effective and efficient community coordination, and care must be taken to ensure consensus of the principal parties.

In *Step 4 (Implementation)* a pilot project can be run to evaluate the curriculum, followed either by revisions and retesting or by continuation of teaching the new curriculum. Part of the implementation step is the publication of curriculum material as necessary and appropriate and the establishment of liaison for ongoing community involvement in the curriculum.

In *Steps 5 and 6 (Evaluation and Expansion)* the committee evaluates what has been accomplished, makes recommendations on any remedial work that needs to be performed, implements the revisions, and looks ahead for new directions and new ideas. Should the course be expanded? Should another course be constructed at the next, more advanced level? Should a new course be developed? Is there a need for more extensive resource materials or for more of the Aboriginal style of teaching and learning? How could the resource material be used to supplement other existing courses?

The specific context of a community negotiation determines how the assumptions in our two documents are applied and how successfully collaborations develop. Our history ranges from the great successes represented by the full degree program in Nisga'a studies, run through a Nisga'a postsecondary education institution, to the relatively easy organization of the Witsuwit'en courses by their Chiefs, to the many Aboriginal groups that we have not been able to approach due to limited resources. The approach seems to be helping to overcome the difficulties we have had in finding a satisfactory process with the Carrier Sekani Tribal Council.

Overall, our experience indicates that the key to the collaborative process is recognition of the distinct but overlapping interests of the communities and the institution. Thus the UNBC model of participatory curriculum development is currently characterized by sharing of control, distributed according to the explicit requirements of the University and community involved. Although we recognize that we have not always been effective in implementing this model, we offer here a couple of successful examples: Nisga'a Studies and Metis Studies.

*The Wilp Wilxo'oskwhl Nisga'a (WWN): Nisga'a Control of Nisga'a Education*  
The Nisga'a are renowned for their longstanding struggle toward self-determination. Their landmark 1973 Supreme Court decision established a process that has led to formalized treaty talks as a means for the Nisga'a to

become part of the Canadian body politic and economy. At the time of writing this process is nearing its historic conclusion. Linked to Nisga'a movements toward political self-determination is a longstanding initiative toward control of Nisga'a education.

Formal Nisga'a language instruction took a foothold around the same time the Nisga'a entered into their 1970 discussions with the provincial government to establish School District #92 (Nisga'a). The new school district manifested the Nisga'a belief in the inseparability of language and culture and in Nisga'a control of education by integrating a bilingual-bicultural department in the new school district. When the school district opened its doors in 1975, language instruction was implemented in each of the four community schools, with additional adult instruction at night school.

In 1985 the Nisga'a Tribal Council (NTC) established an Industry Adjustment Committee with a mandate to determine the training needs for implementing a treaty. The Committee noted that access to postsecondary education remained elusive to the majority of the Nisga'a population and recommended the establishment of the *Wilp Wilxo'oskwahl Nisga'a* (WWN) to provide formalized postsecondary education. *Wilp Wilxo'oskwahl Nisga'a* translates into English as Nisga'a House of Wisdom, which is defined as a house where wisdom is both contained and acquired. An educational administrator from School District #92 was seconded in August 1993, and in December the WWN was incorporated under the Societies Act of BC, governed by an interim board of directors appointed by the Nisga'a Tribal Council. Nisga'a postsecondary education came home. During its first year of formal operation, the WWN offered through a partnership with the Northwest Community College a specially designed adult basic education program to upgrade the education of Nisga'a fishery employees and conducted a successful Tourism and Small Business survey program.

When UNBC was being established, the Nisga'a were already in discussions with the provincial and federal governments regarding the Nisga'a postsecondary institution. UNBC began discussions with the Nisga'a and entered into a protocol agreement that acknowledged the requirements of both institutions and formalized a rich collaborative relationship. The WWN is the final authority on all Nisga'a curriculum and research and approves all Nisga'a curriculum and research undertaken by UNBC faculty or students.

The Protocol Agreement simultaneously recognizes the need for Nisga'a control over standards, as well as the University's needs, and provides Nisga'a control over all hiring. For example, all culture instructors have university degrees at the bachelor's and master's levels and, important for Nisga'a standards, are current practitioners of the culture. These appointments are endorsed by both the Nisga'a and UNBC. All

Nisga'a language instructors are sanctioned by the Nisga'a Language Authority.

Curriculum development and revision are continual. Generally speaking, curriculum development, particularly in Aboriginal languages and cultures, remains a hugely misunderstood and underdeveloped process. The WWN has benefited from the considerable Nisga'a expertise that is available and has involved many Nisga'a people, including the NTC's committee of sages known as the Ayuukhl Nisga'a, and other learned Nisga'a Elders who contribute in many formal and informal ways. One of the students in our first year of operation was an 85-year-old matriarch steeped in her language and culture who provided much assistance even as she "learned how to write Nisga'a." The WWN also drew on the strength and experience gained with development of the Nisga'a School District #92. Although there was limited involvement of external university personnel, when such expertise was needed the WWN was willing and able to obtain it. For example, they hired a linguist to assist in the development of language courses because UNBC's linguist was unavailable to assist WWN in the Nass Valley.

In keeping with Nisga'a philosophy, a distinguishing feature of the WWN curriculum is the centrality of Nisga'a language and culture. Virtually all Nisga'a instructors can and do draw from both culture and language in their instruction. Junior-level instructors receive support from senior instructors who also continually refine the curriculum. The Nisga'a language and culture curricula offered in the university degree program were designed by the WWN's internal Curriculum Committee drawing on UNBC course descriptions and format to adapt existing UNBC courses to Nisga'a realities and to introduce new courses into the UNBC calendar. This "Nisga'a-ization" process was assisted by the Chair of UNBC's First Nations Studies Program, who assisted with university standards, approved curriculum content in terms of UNBC requirements, and facilitated the UNBC course approval process. Consequently, the WWN now offers 32 courses in its First Nations Studies (Nisga'a) degree program.

In September 1994 the WWN and UNBC began to offer the Bachelor of Arts degree program in First Nations Studies: Nisga'a under the auspices of the WWN. Although the curriculum was designed for Nisga'a, it is open to all UNBC students. This curriculum design ensures that the Nisga'a content remains culturally reflective. This very successful BA program is offered as a full-time program in the Nisga'a village of New Aiyansh, and Nisga'a courses are regularly available in five other communities.

This participatory style of curriculum development has resulted in a rich program for the Nisga'a and attracts a great deal of interest among students. In September 1994 UNBC's largest regional enrollment was with the WWN. The WWN has also attracted the interest of international stu-

dents. When Finnish and Japanese students were asked "Why do you want to study in the Nass?" their responses were similar, for example, "This is the only place on earth where I can study First Nations Studies in a First Nations context."

A central issue in Aboriginal curriculum development is control: of budget, faculty, and curriculum. Budget is a key issue. The WWN is an Aboriginal postsecondary institute that functions on "soft" monies, which means resources must be sought every year. Funds come from variety of sources and are not guaranteed by the provincial or federal governments or, to a lesser extent, the University. UNBC, on the other hand, is established under a provincial act and is financially supported by the province. This precarious monetary situation limits what the WWN can and cannot do. However, the FNST Nisga'a program remains a priority, and the WWN employs two full-time language instructors. All other instructors are contracted to teach specific courses. Instruction in the Nisga'a language, unlike instruction in Western languages, cannot be obtained outside of the WWN. The Nisga'a Nation is the embodiment of Nisga'a language and culture; for the Nisga'a language to survive, like many other First Nations languages and cultures, it must be seen by Western society as making an important contribution to the academic world or it could be lost forever. The curricula must continue to grow to higher academic levels—graduate and postgraduate.

The need for formalized relationships between universities such as UNBC and Aboriginal communities is paramount. The Nisga'a experience indicates that these relationships ensure accountability to a particular community and ensure the community relevance that is so important to curriculum design. It is critical to both the WWN and the UNBC to continue to develop and enrich this relationship.

### *Metis Studies*

In the winter term of 1997 two UNBC faculty members began work with the Prince George Metis Elders' Society on an oral history project. Although the goal of the project was set by the Elders and shaped by their input, it was also shaped to meet the wishes of University personnel. For example, an applied anthropology course was designed and implemented to take advantage of the opportunities the project afforded students. Ethics protocols, timelines, and the techniques used in the project reflected the goals and concerns of both the Elders and University personnel.

As a result of the relationships formed while working on the project, the FNST Chair (McDonald) asked one of the faculty (Evans) to approach the Elders' Society about creating some Metis studies curricula. It is appropriate here to reemphasize that the context of these actions is UNBC's mandate to work with Aboriginal communities in northern British Columbia on these kinds of community-oriented projects. The success of the University is measured, in part at least, by its ability in this regard. Similar-

ly, as part of its mandate the Elders' Society is committed to the promotion of Metis culture and history. Because the interests of the Elders' Society and the University overlapped, we co-sponsored development of university-level curricula, which entailed forming a committee of Elders, University personnel, and leaders and experts from the Metis Community. Although the membership of the committee is drawn from a wide range of Metis organizations in Prince George, the institutional sponsors of the process are the University and the Elders' Society. This is reflected in the way copyright is shared on the curriculum developed.

From the perspective of the University the process has been quite successful (Evans & Wright, 1998). The University has added four Metis studies courses and a Metis studies certificate to its curriculum. A basic part of this curriculum is drawn from the oral history project that was the focus of our first collaborative effort (Evans, Gareau, Neilson, Krebs, & Standeven, 1999). The character of the Metis studies courses reflects the interests and goals of both partners. Both a high degree of academic rigor and a large component of community-based expertise are involved in teaching the courses. Perhaps even more important from the University's point of view, however, is that most of the students who have participated in the courses have been from the community. Thus not only can regularly enrolled UNBC students (some of whom are Metis) gain access to community-based courses, but a number of Metis people have also begun to take University courses. We anticipate that some will take further courses in the future, although some may not. The response from the community to the courses has been directly enhanced by how the courses were developed. Because a broad range of organizations were represented on the committee, detailed information about the courses was well diffused in the community; several of the members of the committee who worked on the course development have taken the courses themselves. All of this is to the benefit of the University and forms part of the goals that were set and communicated at the outset.

It is important to be clear that although the community shared in the control of the course curricula through the Elders and other members of the committee, it would not be accurate to talk of unencumbered community control. The community did not control the committee; the control of the process was shared, and the needs of both the University and the Community were heard.

As mentioned above, the courses taught so far have employed a co-instructor model. This model grows from the desire to draw directly on community-based expertise in course instruction while maintaining the University's institutional responsibility to ensure that instructors possess at least a master's degree. They are University courses, although they may also be described otherwise, and the requirement for academic rigor was clearly stated at the inception of the process. In other words, the com-

munity did not have *carte blanche*; the University also had interests and goals. This clearly denies claims of community control, but it also sets the stage for recognition of both University and community as autonomous and self-interested partners.

One of the greatest challenges in building participatory relationships in general is to find a community that wishes to participate and is prepared to do so. If the general issue to be researched is not urgent, the likelihood of finding people who wish to be involved is low. In the case described above there was community urgency and interest and a clear desire on the part of the Elders to serve their community by sponsoring the course development. Without this nothing could have been accomplished. Indeed, the key element in this particular case was the active and enthusiastic work of the Elders' Society. Similarly, the University was eager to provide financial and administrative support for actions that met its mandate. It is neither helpful nor accurate to represent the University role in these processes as working *for* the Metis community. Rather, the institution worked in pursuit of its own goals. The key to the success of this process was the mutual desire, overlapping objectives, and separateness of the partners.

### *Conclusion*

Aboriginal curriculum development, at least in the University context, sits at the intersection of several political, economic, and cultural boundaries. For many Aboriginal communities participation in the development of University programming contains contradictions. Curriculum development initiatives are often situated by the desire to provide education and training opportunities for community members that will allow people to participate in the wider economic and political arenas. At the same time, there is a need to develop educational initiatives that are autonomous from the institutions of the Canadian state and valued according to exclusively community criteria. Similarly, UNBC is caught in another set of contradictions founded in the desire to operate within the traditions of the university system, and yet provide innovative and community-based programming. It is not only wrong but potentially counterproductive to attempt to oversimplify these boundaries. Rather than attempting to ignore boundaries, the UNBC model attempts to encourage the clear recognition of the parties engaged in the curriculum development process and the communication between parties of their expectations and wishes. Assumption and promotion of institutional autonomy is a key factor and, we suggest, the basis from which mutual goals can be identified and achieved. In the process, the boundaries themselves may change, transforming the contradictions to produce a society more inclusive of all its citizens.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Although the use of the term *First Nations* is often held by Metis communities to be exclusive, it is not so intended here or in the programs developed at UNBC. Indeed, one of our more successful and mature initiatives is with the Metis community.

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