

# Creating Space for Innovation: Responsive Program Development in the Borderlands of Tertiary Education

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*For many of those who work in academia there is a strong appeal to engage in partnership work with communities. However, the demands and challenges of the university are different than the demands and challenges facing communities, and forging effective university-community partnerships is difficult work. This article explores the use of the “borderland” in a university environment to reach out and across to communities more effectively.*

Tertiary education worldwide is in a place of turmoil, transition—and possibility. On the one hand, universities are one of the most fully preserved institutions in existence (Kerr, 2001); the lecture halls of medieval universities would not feel unfamiliar to those attending universities in most parts of the world today. On the other hand, the age of computers has brought university education to the most remote corners of the world. These institutions are key globalizing agents able now to reach invisibly across borders and barriers, and their reach is both promising and troubling. Nowhere is this dichotomy more evident than in Indigenous communities around the world.

Many Indigenous groups, acutely aware of academia’s role in colonization and cultural erasure, have sought to counter such activities and to promote their own values and knowledge through the creation of their own institutions, using both electronic and face-to-face instruction. In some cases new and free-standing institutions have been developed; in other cases distinct programs and departments have been created in established institutional structures. For example, in Aotearoa/New Zealand a free-standing Maori postsecondary system rapidly became the fastest growing segment of tertiary education, moving from 188,996 students in 1999 to 283,986 students in 2005. Maori were underrepresented at all levels in tertiary education until 1999; therefore, these figures represent a significant turnaround (New Zealand Ministry of Education, n.d.). In my own university, the University of Victoria, an Aboriginal Governance program was established in 1996 in the School of Public Administration; by 1999 it had become a separate program, although continuing to share space in the Public Administration hallway. Myriad other examples exist (Battiste & Barman, 1995; Brant Castellano, Davis, & Lahache, 2000), with Native Teacher Education Programs (TEPs; Congress of Aboriginal

Peoples, n.d.) having one of the longest histories in the formal structure of tertiary education institutions in Canada. Each of these programs, free-standing or embedded, has advantages and disadvantages, and a useful history of experience is developing around these options.

This article explores another way: an approach to program development and delivery created in the “borderland” of a mainstream institution, seeking distance from the centripetal forces of power, but still benefiting from certain aspects of its presence. The borderland as understood in this institutional analogy is a place that borders on and opens to the *other*. Borderlands have historically served as places of creative intercourse, yielding directions and ideas not conceivable in established centers of power or available in remote, undisturbed locations. It is a place of interaction, uncertainty, and change. This particular borderland sought low visibility and low obstruction from the institution, but high visibility and high viability with external community partners. It is a place that we found could yield benefits and possibilities perhaps unique in the Indigenous and international development fields.

Two programs that I have developed in the University of Victoria, one with national and one with international partners,<sup>1</sup> were created in an institutional borderland space: the First Nations Partnerships Program (FNPP) and the Early Childhood Development Virtual University (ECDVU). The FNPP and ECDVU experiences lead one to believe that program space and knowledge space are not independent of each other. Positioned and balancing between separate worlds, the temptation to grasp a singular “regime of truth” (Foucault, 1979) is reduced and a position of openness enhanced.

### *The FNPP and ECDVU Experiences*

#### *FNPP*

The FNPP and the ECDVU owe their existence to several leaders of an Indigenous tribal council who well understood the interaction of power and knowledge. The administration and leadership of the Meadow Lake Tribal Council (MLTC), located in northern Saskatchewan, appreciated the two-worlds nature of their existence, referred to by one tribal Elder as “two sides of an eagle feather—both are needed to fly” (personal communication). The Council felt that an understanding of and an ability to live and work in both worlds was essential for their people’s well-being. In the late 1980s the Council approved a motion noting:

The First Nations of the Meadow Lake Tribal Council believe that a child care program developed, administered, and operated by their own people is a vital component to their vision of sustainable growth and development.... It will be the children who inherit the struggle to retain and enhance the people’s culture, language, and history; who continue the quest for economic progress for a better quality of life; and who move forward with a strengthened resolve to plan their own destiny. (Meadow Lake Tribal Council, 1989, p. 1)

To address their education and training needs, MLTC considered various options: expanding the offerings of a non-Aboriginal regional college program already available to them through a local distance education center; partnering with an Aboriginal institution located several hours to the south; or creating a new relationship with an out-of-province university two provinces and 2,000 km away. They chose the third option.

Thus in the spring of 1989 I received a call from the Executive Director of the MLTC Ray Ahenakew requesting a meeting in my office to discuss early childhood training needs in their nine communities. I questioned how useful such a meeting would be given that my university department did not have an Aboriginal curriculum and the university itself had virtually no programs focusing on Aboriginal education. Ray, however, was insistent that a meeting take place. It became clear at that meeting that the community had given ECCD a good deal of thought. We were being asked to join as "technical members," not those who would steer the planning and development of services for the young children in their communities. The fact that the Council was clearly in the driver's seat and our role was to support their efforts felt absolutely right. By the end of the meeting, MLTC had my commitment to do what I could to support their initiative.

It was sometime later that I came to understand more fully the reasons behind the request and why MLTC had traveled so far to find a partner. They had approached other academic institutions, but typically those institutions already had an "Aboriginal program" that they indicated they would be pleased to deliver. None was interested in creating a program that followed a particular council's vision, because the institution already had its own vision. MLTC was also seeking an institution that could guarantee that first- and second-year coursework would bridge into third- and fourth-year degree completion courses. They had too often experienced dead-end certificates and diplomas from one institution (typically colleges) that would not bridge into another. They believed that a university with courses that flowed from first year through fourth was best positioned to ensure that such bridging could take place. They wanted a partner who would respect their voices and not just follow their own institution's ways of understanding. They also sought overall program credibility and felt that my scholarly visibility and that of the School of Child and Youth Care would be an asset. It was apparent at the first meeting that a high level of background research had already been undertaken; this, combined with the personal power and commitment of Executive Director Ahenakew, were important assets as we challenged systems and understandings not only on campus, but in the communities.

The FNPP story has been told a number of times, and various facets of it have been explored. The earliest articles highlighted the partnership nature of the work and the creation of a Generative Curriculum Model that allowed knowledge from both academia and the communities to

come together through appropriate voices (typically Elders from the communities and instructors from the university) allowing a space where new perspectives and ideas might be generated (Pence, Kuehne, Greenwood, & Opekokew, 1993; Pence & McCallum, 1994). Later articles focused on the importance of culturally and developmentally appropriate practice (Ball & Pence, 1999), co-constructing knowledge (Ball & Pence, 2000), and post-modern understandings of early childhood care and development (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2006). In 2002 the program was included by UNESCO in *Best Practices Using Indigenous Knowledge* (Ball & Pence, 2002); it was one of only 22 programs to be so recognized internationally. An overarching publication that discusses the history, dynamics, and learning achieved across all ten FNPP deliveries with nine tribal organizations was published in 2006 (Ball & Pence, 2006).

### *ECDVU*

The ECDVU story also begins with a request, this time from UNICEF. The Senior Advisor for ECD in UNICEF Cyril Dalais was invited to participate in a major international Child and Youth Care conference in Victoria in 1994. The conference was coterminous with a three-week Early Childhood Leadership Summer Institute, a series that I had established several years earlier and that had attracted senior and middle-level ECE leaders and managers from across Canada. The format was informal and highly interactive; it typically featured an international scholar working at the leading edge of a particular development in the field. The Advisor found the format and content stimulating, and he proposed that such a program be extended to the majority world. The first international Summer Institute (later termed ECD Seminars) took place in Victoria in 1995. It was followed by one in Southeast Asia and two in Africa in the years following. UNICEF was the major supporter of the seminars, but participants typically also had some support from their employers. Planning and support for the seminars took place in the FNPP university borderlands space. The principles that had guided the FNPP—a philosophy of inclusion, an emphasis on local voices and local leadership, an ecological perspective, and strengths-focused programming—carried over into the international seminars.

The seminars were very successful, leading the participants to request that a way be found to connect the participants over time and to find out how such valuable learning could receive academic credit. In 1998 the World Bank in cooperation with UNICEF helped support the second seminar in Africa. The capacity-building, leadership-promotion, and network-enhancement work of the seminars fitted well with the Bank's own assessment of ECD development needs in Africa. When approached about creating an early childhood virtual university, they were receptive. Dollars to develop the program were made available from the Norwegian Educational Trust Fund in 2000. The Bank stipulated that the delivery of the

program should bring in other sponsors, and successful proposals were made to UNICEF, UNESCO, Bernard van Leer, and CIDA. The first three-year MA-degree-level pilot of the ECDVU began in September 2001 with 30 students and finished in November 2004 with a 90% completion rate and 96% retention in-country: virtually no brain drain. The ECDVU underwent a major evaluation as to external effects at the end of the 2001-2004 program. The evaluator noted in the conclusion of the Executive Summary, "by any measure the ECDVU has been singularly successful in meeting and exceeding all of its objectives" (World Bank, 2005, p. 12). Since then, one-year program deliveries have taken place in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, in Yemen (a country-focused delivery), and most recently (2007) in cooperation with universities in Ghana and Malawi.

Although the ECDVU program is structurally different from the FNPP program,<sup>2</sup> the philosophy as outlined above is similar. Both programs include Western-based materials and understandings, but both also create space for local and cultural knowledge to emerge and engage with Western perspectives. This connection with the local, demonstration of respect for other knowledges, and consideration of what new ideas can be generated through the interaction of diverse perspectives is a hallmark of both programs—and an interaction that is facilitated through positioning the programs in the borderland.

#### *Institutional Borderlands*

The decision to locate the FNPP program in the borderland of the university was partly planned and partly fortuitous. Space had become available that was consistent with my desire to maintain a low profile from the campus center and that allowed a less impeded view outside to the communities. Both positives and negatives flowed from the decision, but ultimately I believe that the programs were able to be truer to their partners by strategically establishing a place on the edge of the institution. The nature of the program would have been more fundamentally influenced by the voice of academia if its structural base had been fully situated in the mainstream of the institution and subject to the forces that daily mold perspective, priorities, and energy. In this section I discuss structural issues of life in the borderlands—how to create, survive, and thrive at the edge of an institution—whereas in the subsequent section I consider the nature of knowledge and knowledges in the borderlands as differing ideas, values, histories, cultures, and contexts mix, engage, and transform as life in the academy cannot match and often resists.

The FNPP and the ECDVU benefited from their birth in a department that was itself an anomaly. Few universities have a school of child and youth care, a hybrid born of residential youth care and early childhood care and development. The two departments had separate histories and literatures, but drew their central ideas from related disciplines: psycholo-

gy, sociology, and anthropology primarily, and from professional studies in education, health services, social work, and related service disciplines. With faculty coming from the above disciplines and professions, the school was already a meeting ground for diverse ideas and experiences. The school was also an innovator and a fighter. Having forged a unique academic and professional identity, focusing not on the institutions of children and youth (schools, care facilities, families), but on the child understood holistically across those settings, it was threatened in the 1970s and early 1980s to be taken over by another department, Social Work. Such challenges in the form of “what doesn’t kill me makes me stronger” did indeed strengthen the school, forcing it to excel at instruction, research, and scholarly publication.

As is the case on most campuses, space being always in short supply, one of the first questions asked when project funding is approved is “Where will the staff be housed?” The timing of the FNPP project was propitious as the school itself was preparing to move to a new building. The FNPP was able to stay behind in a space that had changed from housing a faculty with five departments/schools to becoming a building of odds and ends. The project, although an academic activity, found itself located outside the mainstream of academia: To appear on our doorstep one was either lost or had made a special trip.

Such a placement below the radar allowed our gaze and attention to fall primarily on our partner communities: Aboriginal communities far removed from the university. From the FNPP’s perspective, the communities were our primary partners; the university was a welcome and important facilities base, but not the main focus of our creative and interactive attention. Funding for the project came from federal sources through the MLTC. In essence, the communities were our employers, and the FNPP would be judged successful or not by the opinion of and events in the communities.

Our allegiance toward the *other* was not flaunted or treated provocatively on campus. We depended on both for our success. From the university’s perspective any activity based on, accredited by, or emanating from the physical plant of the university should identify itself first and foremost with the institution. Clearly a program like the FNPP required a firm link to the institution as well as to the communities. The FNPP evolved a multilevel linkage system to connect itself with the university and the partner communities. My role as Project Director became that of chief liaison with university administration (at various levels from departmental to senior administration) and with the leadership group at the tribal council. All other positions (course-writers, administrative support, community liaison, locally based instructors) had virtually no contact with the university and focused only on the communities.

The fact that the program itself was delivered off campus (typically far from the university and often in remote areas) greatly reduced the potential for on-campus visibility. All interaction with the students and the communities took place through the FNPP offices. This included the establishment of initial agreements. Typically, communities or councils located funds and then contracted with FNPP for program redevelopment and delivery; these agreements were then taken forward by the Project Director for signature by the university administration. Students were registered as a cohort, with forms gathered by the FNPP and conveyed en masse to the Registrar's office; negotiations about admission of mature students (in cases where a student had strong life experience but was missing some aspects of his or her academic background) were similarly handled through the FNPP office. Numerous related administrative issues were handled by the FNPP. In essence the FNPP was the *agent* of both the student and the community in their interactions with the university. Given the program's uniqueness, such a singular interface for the students with the university was essential for the smooth operation of the program.

This responsibility assumed by FNPP was understood as one of the key elements of the partnership: that the FNPP was best positioned to act on behalf of the partnership about university procedures and requirements, and the tribal council was best positioned to act on behalf of the partnership about First Nations community and tribal matters. This division of responsibility and expertise was acknowledged early in the FNPP process, and transgressions were addressed. I remember, for example, one situation in which I engaged directly with a community on behalf of a student and was firmly reminded by the tribal council administration where the line was drawn. It was appropriate for me to discuss any situation with my tribal administration counterpart, but not to take on personally a situation that fell under tribal authority broadly understood. Similarly, tribal interaction with university faculty or administration was rare, typically taking place only at the end of a program as part of a graduation ceremony—to which on various occasions the President, Chancellor, Registrar, Dean, and various directors were invited to attend and offer congratulations on behalf of the university.

As noted above, the connection with the university was vested in the Project Director, and this connection was primarily through the administrative line (Director, Dean, Registrar, and Vice-President, primarily). It was not deemed helpful to attempt high visibility and transparency across broad faculty member structures; for example, detailed discussions at school, faculty, or university levels were engaged in only as required for various program approvals. However, full transparency and prior notification were seen as essential along the administrative line. Our mantra was "don't surprise the administration"—and the practice served FNPP well. A combination of program success (which was apparent once

evaluation data were available) and keeping the administration informed won on-campus advocates for the programs and allowed the establishment of certain unique, facilitative procedures that saved many hours (and for myself additional grey hairs). Time spent engaging with diverse faculty and committees who were unfamiliar with the FNPP programs, rationales, and potentials and were trained to “pick holes” or engage in debate was tiring and seldom productive. On the other hand, time spent updating administrators and engaging in planning and problem-solving was typically time well spent. In such a project it is important that the project leader be able to engage when necessary in academic debate, as faculty questions are never fully avoidable, nor is the practice necessarily counterproductive. It is also important once data are available, that a project be able to defend its work in terms of both academic and community merit. Evaluation and scholarly publication should be considered as critically important activities for the overall project. This academic evidence and the respect it engenders enables one more easily to move through various aspects of academia. In the FNPP such work was always vetted and often co-authored with community members.

There are, as seen from the above, a multitude of challenges that projects like the FNPP and ECDVU must address in their interface with the university. The bulk of these challenges are best handled through limiting the points of interaction between the project and the institution and having clear rationales and protocols for whatever contact points are necessary (e.g., student registration procedures or the bookkeeping function in the project and its counterpart at the university). For such key and ongoing contacts, it was desirable to have a specific and sufficiently senior contact (decision-making level) to plan cooperatively and then establish the procedures that could become routine. In the experience of both the FNPP and the ECDVU, strong personal connections with key people in the administrative structure of the university were essential. It is critical that the importance of these contacts be fully understood before initial contacts are made, as challenges will inevitably appear from time to time that require a base of respect and clear communications.

It is counterproductive for projects such as the FNPP and the ECDVU to be based in a fish-bowl environment of visibility at the core of the university. With programs that must specifically work to overcome or reconceptualize educational practices, being scrutinized and questioned by those steeped in such practices can create counter forces that can easily overwhelm the progressive work at hand. Such a fish-bowl situation diverts the project’s attention from where it should be—the particular communities off campus—to challenges that can all too easily arise on campus, sapping time, energy, and creative productivity. Placing the FNPP and the ECDVU in the borderlands of the campus (in bedraggled World War II huts quite removed from the mainstream of institutional



academia) allowed the projects to focus more easily on our outside partners and through this engagement, to explore more fully ideas that emerge in the borderlands of knowledge.

As noted above, there are downsides to being located in the borderland of an institution. The same lack of visibility that allows a program to focus more fully on its external partners also allows the university to forget that its student body is more than those visible from the clock tower on campus or that the sum of all programs offered is evident in the substantial brick, stone, and concrete buildings that form the pride of the campus. The fact that funding is almost entirely external for both the FNPP and ECDVU, and that it seemed (from the university's perspective) to flow with artesian regularity, allowed the university to avoid base-budgeting the programs, thus accepting the milk of praise without the cost of feeding the cow. This too is part of the experience of the FNPP and ECDVU. Indeed the FNPP has been forced into a state of hibernation as of 2006, a victim of the ongoing challenge of working with communities to secure funding. Nevertheless, a great deal was accomplished over its 17 years: the program cut new ground academically and pedagogically; its work is being sustained through two colleges that participated in early deliveries of the program and continue their work to the present; other opportunities for partnering on child and youth activities emerged through the initial FNPP partnership; a subsequent Aboriginal program on campus adopted the FNPP community-based approach in its own successful development and delivery; a good percentage of graduates from some communities with accessible educational institutions have moved on to complete bachelor's degrees and a number of master's degrees as well; evidence of its effect is still apparent in the communities that participated in the program; and its philosophy is being carried forward through the ECDVU program.

From the earliest meetings with the Meadow Lake Tribal Council (MLTC), it was clear that "education as usual" was neither what was sought nor what was needed for the communities to claim a leadership role in planning and providing for their children and families. MLTC and many other tribal organizations across the country have a multitude of experiences with various forms of tertiary education, both in their communities and outside. Beyond the severe issues of brain drain by young people forced to pursue their education away from home communities and the dislocation of one- and two-year programs provided on or near reserves that fail to articulate with four-year degree programs off reserve, the council was also concerned with the content of what was being learned, in particular the absence of cultural and tribal voices and values in the curriculum. Through a series of meetings with community members, project team members, and one with an international advisory group, the FNPP developed an approach that came to be called the Generative Curriculum Model, which was based on a co-construction of know-

ledge, respecting both local and traditional knowledge as well as Western knowledge (Ball & Pence, 1999; Pence et al., 1993). For such an approach to work, it was essential that local knowledge come directly from respected community members, not as a distillate from Western sources and Western voices. Meadow Lake and subsequent tribal partners identified a person who would serve as an Intergenerational Coordinator, ensuring that appropriate community members were invited to participate as contributors to and co-instructors in the program.

The two-year pilot program with MLTC exceeded both partners' expectations. The council hired a trusted Elder from another tribal group to undertake an evaluation at the end of the program. Jette (1993) noted in her report:

Some of the greatest benefits of the Meadow Lake Tribal Council's Indian Child Care Program are those that were not included in the list of eight basic objectives. These spinoffs have made a significant impact on the lifestyle and community spirit.... The involvement of the Elders in the Indian Child Care Program and subsequently into all community events and undertakings has led to a revitalization of cultural pride and traditional value systems. These individuals are those that hold the fabric of community life together. (pp. 57, 59)

#### *Conceptual Borderlands*

It was at approximately that point, through the two years of the pilot program delivery and Debbie Jette's evaluation, and through being the Canadian participant for a series of international meetings exploring the emergent "sociology of the child" (see Qvortrup, Bardy, Sgritta, & Wintersberg, 1994, for a summative statement about that project), that I began more fully to appreciate the relationship between knowledge, power, and community capacity. Jette's words revealed that the FNPP had become more than a curriculum development and delivery project, with outputs associated with course evaluations and assessment of individual students' performance. It was the beginning of a journey that needed to explore more critically the limitations and sources of knowledge: how every perspective curtails others and how these omissions can become blinders not only at a personal level, but also at a broader social level. Hearing the *local* was not only ethically important, it was central to broader social and community development. When Elders and respected other community members were brought in as part of the instructional team, they became "professors," people with valuable knowledge to share. This image rippled quickly throughout the communities, and "we all held our heads a little higher" (B. Opekokew, video interview).

Hearing these perspectives helped me move into the borderland of my own professional literature to question the accepted canons and to formulate other understandings. I remember attending a small institute of 15 senior academics from about seven countries near the time we were concluding the initial MLTC program. The focus was on quality child care, a subject I had written a good deal about in the early and mid-1980s. I began

to problematize that work, questioning externally and academically driven approaches to defining quality, including reliance on externally developed instruments, that did not open up to community or parental perspectives. The group divided sharply on this “provocation”; the Scandinavians were comfortable with such questions, and the North Americans decidedly were not. I bring up this experience here because it was through the privilege of being able to see issues of training, programming, and knowledge through the eyes of Aboriginal communities that my own thinking began to shift away from what I “knew,” and the methods that I used, based on my academic background. Creating a space in a borderland of tertiary education allowed ideas from outside the communities to engage more easily with those from inside, leading to the generation of new understandings at the academic research table as well as at the classroom table in the communities.

The work of reconceptualizing early childhood care and development has over time become my central scholarly activity (Dahlberg et al., 2006; Moss & Pence, 1994; Pacini-Ketchabaw & Pence, 2005; Pence, 1998; Pence & Hix-Small, 2007) moving well beyond my more academically traditional work of the 1980s. Although I continue to value the work that I and other colleagues produced in the 1980s, I am convinced that true capacity-building and sustainability cannot be achieved from outside. It is only through meaningful engagement with, and respect for, the *other*—perhaps best measured by one’s openness to conceptual transformation—that meaningful and hopeful ways forward can be identified. As the request from MLTC demonstrates, those from outside (e.g., academics) have significant roles to play. One does not enter such environments bereft of thoughts, ideas, experiences, and knowledge: indeed it is these attributes that are typically sought. At the same time, those entering must be respectful of what they do not know, opening themselves to learning and change. Now as they have been historically, the borderlands are a place of change and possibilities, a place for challenges to power and to orthodoxy, a place to encounter diversity on its own terms and not as some romanticized or powerless *other*.

#### *Ensuring Space for the Borderlands in Tertiary Education*

I have lived and worked in the borderlands for over 17 years, more than half of my 27 years in academia. I was brought to this space through a fortuitous request from a tribal council that coincided with the happy accident of space left behind in a departmental move. From this left-behind space it became possible to focus more intently on our work beyond the physical entity of the university, to ensure that the bulk of our attention could be on the partner outside rather than on the academic dynamics and forces inside. And through the intensity of that focus and the freedom to align with the wishes of the communities, we were able to enter not only a different physical space (of the *other*), but a different conceptual space as

well. It is a space that allows one to observe the ways and thoughts of academia, but also to come to appreciate the ways and thoughts of those outside academia. It is the borderlands that open up to other possibilities.

When combinations of information technology, media, and globalized education threaten to overwhelm social diversity, affecting not only Indigenous peoples, but all non-Western societies, the concept of the borderlands as a place of change, transition, and contested realities is an invaluable resource. It is a place for the generation of new ideas and a place for the unexpected to arise. Universities are predominantly homogenizing and colonizing agents, but they can also be places supportive of social invention and social preservation. Such places do not thrive in the core structures, the orthodoxy of the university, but in spaces protected from such pressures. It is critical that educational institutions consciously and conscientiously work not only to preserve such spaces, but also to create them where they do not exist. It is in such places that there is hope, a possible third way, for Indigenous communities and academia to find ways forward that serve both interests.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Community partners with the FNPP were First Nations in Canada and with the ECDVU, country-identified ECD leaders in the Middle East and Africa.

<sup>2</sup>For example, ECDVU is primarily Web-based with a two-week face-to-face seminar each six-month term, versus face-to-face in-community instruction/interaction with the FNPP. Also, coursework is at the graduate level rather than undergraduate first and second years as is the case with the FNPP.

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