



VICTORIA  
URBAN  
ABORIGINAL  
LEARNING  
CIRCLE

## VICTORIA LEARNING CIRCLES



First Report | Sylvia Nicholles

# Victoria Learning Circles

## First Report

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### Introduction:

In May of 2009, the Victoria Native Friendship Centre, in conjunction with the University of Northern British Columbia and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council hosted a series of *Learning Circles* on urban Aboriginal Economic Development.

The *Learning Circles* were designed to stimulate community discussions about how Aboriginal people could strengthen their economy, and how to encourage Aboriginal people in the Victoria area to become active in business development.

The initial *Learning Circles* were held between May 25 and June 18, 2009, at the Victoria Native Friendship Centre. This Report summarizes discussions from the initial two Learning Circles, and sets out the anticipated next steps for the participants.

*The first Learning Circle held at the Victoria Native Friendship Centre brought together practitioners, entrepreneurs, government representatives and academics interested in the potential for Aboriginal entrepreneurship in the Victoria urban community.*



### *The Learning Circle Process:*

A Learning Circle<sup>1</sup> is a small group dialogue designed to encourage people to listen and speak from the heart in a spirit of inquiry. A safe space is created so participants can be share their ideas, goals, and experience in an open, authentic process. The Learning Circle - a traditional form of dialogue among North American Aboriginal people - is a grouping of equals based on the first principle of living systems, the concept that “everything is connected”, or as stated by the Nuu-chah-Nulth First Nations, *hishuk ish ts’awalk* – “everything is one”.

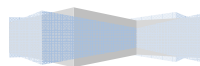
### *The Participants:*

The Learning Circles attracted a range of community members and professionals (a list of participants is attached as Appendix 3). These included:

- Local Aboriginal entrepreneurs
- People involved in training and job readiness programs
- Staff from the Victoria Native Friendship Centre with an interest in community economic development
- Graduate students from the University of Victoria
- Representatives from Aboriginal community agencies
- Community members
- Representatives from Government ministries
- A facilitator and coordinator funded by the University of Northern British Columbia

### *Key Questions:*

To organize the discussion, the Learning Circles asked participants to begin by addressing some key questions. These were starting places: once the discussion began the path of inquiry came from the participants, and from their interactions.



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<sup>1</sup> Heierbacher, Sandy. “NCDD’S Engagement Streams Framework,” @ [www.thataway.org](http://www.thataway.org) page 4.

## SUMMARY OF LEARNING CIRCLE 1 (May 25<sup>th</sup>/09)

*First Question:*

***Question 1: What assets does the Victoria urban Aboriginal community bring to economic development?***

The group began by exploring the various strengths of the urban Aboriginal community in Victoria.

These strengths include a rich Aboriginal culture that includes a variety of artistic talents, an established tourism industry, strong training facilities that offer a wide breadth of programs to the Aboriginal population, easy access to financially

literate individuals and business plans and an alternative community in Victoria that supports and appreciates local business.

Other strengths noted were the robust organic gardening movement and an interest in alternative spiritual and healing practices that draw upon Aboriginal knowledge. The group viewed many of these strengths as potential starting points to an entrepreneurial pursuit.

*Second key Question:*

The next round of discussion concentrated on challenges in the community for entrepreneurs. The group's main focus was on the lack of funding and access to resources for Aboriginal entrepreneurs that wish to start up a business. The general feeling was that a lack of knowledge about resources was the main problem with regards to accessing funding, business plans, and aid for keeping a business running.

***Question 2: What challenges does the community face in developing its economy?***

A problem that was specific to Victoria is that the community can be very insular, and does not readily accept new entrepreneurs. Another issue specific to Victoria was the sense that there is a lack of space or tools to create goods to sell, which may stem from being isolated from other entrepreneurs. This isolation also lends to a lack of motivation for self-employment and fear of the risk that this type of venture holds.

Other challenges faced by Aboriginal entrepreneurs in Victoria include the problem of high staff turnover, the difficulties of transitioning from reserve to city life, being caught in the 'welfare trap', and drug/alcohol dependence problems.

Finally, the group noted that ‘post-secondary’ education in high schools, colleges and universities that does not promote business ownership is often privileged over ‘traditional’ education or knowledge that may lend itself better to entrepreneurship.

### *Potential businesses and Collective Projects*



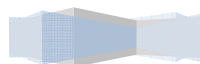
*After brainstorming different resources within the community, the group began to focus on different business ideas....*

Once participants had discussed the assets, resources, and challenges facing Aboriginal community members, they group turned their attention to identifying different business ideas.

Aboriginal food was a highlight of the discussion, with the idea of partnering with a local restaurant to offer an Aboriginal menu. This would be most viable during tourist season, but could eventually evolve into an Aboriginal restaurant.

Other ideas included holding a fundraiser for local entrepreneurs, and starting up an Aboriginal business network in Victoria. The group felt that such a network would begin to address some of the challenges in the community, while drawing upon the various strengths through providing a way for entrepreneurs to link up with one another. The point of such a network would be to provide mentors and role models for youth, as well as support and resources for early stage entrepreneurs.

It was agreed upon that next meeting should be focused on trying to develop one of these ideas further. Upon closing, the group agreed to meet in three weeks time.



## **SUMMARY OF LEARNING CIRCLE 2 (June 18<sup>th</sup>/09):**

The second Victoria learning circle had many of the same participants as the first, with the addition of representatives from two Aboriginal capital corporations, as well as more entrepreneurs and government representatives.

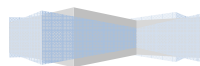
The group, after a brief review of what occurred in the previous session, launched into a discussion about the role of the community in Aboriginal economic development. This conversation involved three themes:

- the importance of being connected in the community, as word of mouth in Victoria is often the best way to be successful in a small business.
- that the community has to spearhead and support any projects in order to be successful. This involves being recognizant of the needs of the community on behalf of the entrepreneur.
- Finally, the group expressed that particularly in the case of Aboriginal economic development, the community has an essential role to play in terms of mentorship and recognizing the role of all members.

This led into a practical discussion regarding stakeholders that needed to be brought to the table. The Capital Regional District (CRD) was regarded to be a key player in business and social planning; having an integral role in how business can proceed in Victoria. There was a keen recognition that the CRD is attempting to be more sensitive to Indigenous values with regards to planning, but may not regard the inclusion of such values as important to stimulating urban Aboriginal economic development. There was a hope that a representative of the CRD could be brought to the table at future circles.

With this in mind, the group decided that it would be beneficial to draft a recruitment letter that is endorsed and signed by the group to target more people to bring into the circle. The CRD, lawyers, accountants and counselors were listed as important figures to be contacted.

In addition to the letter, several ideas were tabled to promote and expand the circle. These included, but were not limited to, contacting the various band offices, creating a newsletter, a website and tapping into the national network of circles and international examples to learn how other groups promoted Aboriginal economic development. Specifically, the example of the Maori economic development was viewed as having potential, because of the opportunity that one of the members has to do research in New Zealand.



### *Key Idea: Local Aboriginal Chamber of Commerce*

The group recognized that while promoting the circle was a good idea, that starting up a local board of trade to provide services such as a mentorship program, to promote local Aboriginal business, and to create a space where entrepreneurs can interact and learn from each other, is much needed in Victoria.

It was decided that the best way to do this, would be to create a co-operative business association that would be set up as a non-profit organization. This, it was suggested, could be set up as a Chamber of Commerce model. The group proceeded to discuss the next steps to make this happen. It was agreed that a co-operative business plan would have to be drafted up or ascertained from the network, memberships would have to be sold, and that the underlying rhetoric for such a business association would be based on promoting cultural similarities with recognition of traditional trading routes in the region as a starting point. The discussion then turned to naming the association, and coming up with a mission statement. The group decided that a Chinook word would be used in the title.

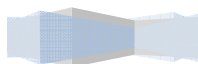
The circle ended the day with addressing the question of how to measure the benefits of Aboriginal business to the economy. It was agreed upon that this was an important question to address when thinking about urban Aboriginal economic development, as currently, most measures are not based on criteria that would address specifically Aboriginal business and entrepreneurship. The circle closed with the intention of meeting again to develop further the business association idea as this was seen as having the most potential for aiding urban Aboriginal economic development.

*Overall, the circles were viewed as a success, many of the participants felt it was worthwhile to attend. By bringing together people that are interested in this issue, but do not normally have a venue to meet and discuss, possibilities are revealed.*

*There is much work to be done in Victoria in setting up the business association; however the learning circles initiated the process.*

### **Next Steps**

As of this Report, the participants in the two Victoria Learning Circles on urban Aboriginal Economic Development have agreed to meet again, and to actively pursue the idea of a business support group for Aboriginal entrepreneurs in Victoria area. A Chinook name has been suggested, and another meeting is being organized.



## *Appendix 1: Minutes from May 25, 2009 Learning Circle*

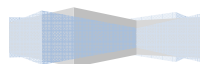
Began: 9:30

### *Strengths of the Community*

- Culturally rich
- Well-established strong tourism industry that seeks traditional, culturally rich goods
- Many potential possibilities in Victoria for specifically Aboriginal businesses
- Strong training facilities (Camosun, UVic) with a wide breadth of programs that cater to the Aboriginal population
- Access to many people that are financially literate, able to provide support to entrepreneurs
- Strong artistic talent (specific case mentioned: incarcerated population)
- Strong Co-op culture
- Strong alternative culture that appreciates locally produced goods (and food)
- Spiritual/Healing support and culture strong in town, recognizes and respects the importance of alternative practices
- Organic movement in town is very popular, could be tapped into as a place to market Aboriginal foods and agriculture
- Strong gardening culture
- Access to business plans and expertise
- Strong local restaurants, community is willing to support

### *Challenges*

- Lack of funding
- Inability to get or keep staff
- Reserve to town transition can be difficult
- The welfare trap
- Financial literacy
- Access/Knowledge of resources in the community
- Lack of space or tools to create goods
- Lack of knowledge of cultural practices, struggles to 'get in touch' with Aboriginal culture
- Isolation from other artists, or groups of entrepreneurs and artists
- Issues with drug/alcohol dependence and addiction
  - o Could lead to people not wanting to purchase goods
- Problems of low participation rates in workshops and other services offered
- Gap between undervalued 'traditional' education and privileged 'post-secondary' education
- Gate-keeping
- 'Old boys club' mentality: gender biases
- Cliques in community, can be difficult to get linked in
- Native groups are closed, difficult to gain entry
- Lack of knowledge about different groups in the community
- Credit!
- Motivation for self-employment and taking that risk



Different resources mentioned in the circle:

- Feasting for Change movement
- Farmers without land
- Ministry of Agriculture programs: Agricultural Farming Resource
- Micro-loans from credit unions (up to \$35,000)
- Western Economic Diversification
- Connections to UBC and SFU
- Can provide business plan templates
- Aboriginal Agricultural Education Society of B.C.
- NEDC
- PAGs (Peer Advisory Groups)

Different Business Ideas mentioned in the circle: (some of these are private)

- Aboriginal Restaurant
- Partnering with a restaurant to provide an Aboriginal menu and chef
- Artists' Co-op of incarcerated individuals
- Fundraiser held in VNFC gym, and commercial kitchen
- Construction opportunities for renovating the gym
- Aboriginal Business Network: provide mentorship and role models as well as information about different Aboriginal businesses in Victoria, providing support and resources to early stage entrepreneurs

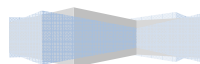
Directions from the Meeting:

Bruce Leslie: Try to get the support of the VNFC board for Aboriginal Entrepreneurs at the Cent

Shirley Lang: Would like to start an entrepreneur network group

- Create a list of Aboriginal Businesses
- Get NEDC on board
- Try to include more Aboriginal youth that may be interested in business.

It was agreed by everyone to invite two more people to the circle. Next one to be held in three weeks (3<sup>rd</sup> week of June) depending on NEDC representative's schedule.



## Appendix 2: Minutes from June 18, 2009 Learning Circle

Question 1: What is the role of the community in Aboriginal economic development?

- Connectedness of the community to the development process
- Word of mouth is important
- The community has to spearhead and support any projects
- Finding out the needs of the community is integral to a successful business
- Everyone has a role to play, mentorship can only come from a community

The Capital Regional District (CRD) was seen to be a key player in thinking about business and social planning

- Espoused need for inclusion of Indigenous values in social planning and zoning regulation

Need to recruit more people into the circle and suggested a recruitment letter that is endorsed and signed by the group.

- Who should the recruitment letter target?
  - o CRD
  - o Lawyers
  - o Accountants
  - o Counselors

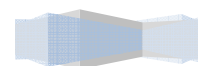
Maori economic development in New Zealand as an example that could be researched and learned from.

The group came up with several ideas to promote the circle and economic development more generally:

- Contacting the band offices
- A newsletter
- Website
- Tapping into both the national network of circles, and international examples

Remittance idea:

- Recognizes that reserves are tax-free, and that investment funds could be set up to put money into an on reserve corporation
- Research needed:
  - o Tax laws
  - o Remittance corporations in other countries
  - o What kind of business would work?
- Would be aimed at status holders, with the hope of incorporating traditional values, as a local movement involving sustainability, justice, with a holistic approach to health and poverty issues



Expressed a need to include the expertise of Aboriginal lawyers and accountants, and to communicate with other communities (the example of Campbell River was used)

A discussion about casinos ensued, and the idea of looking to traditional games such as stick games was mentioned as a business idea.

A need for a mentorship program targeted towards youth was expressed.

- Targeting parents was discussed as a possibility to encourage youth to become involved in business

- Problem identified: distrust of education within the community

- Possibility of contacting small business owners for a mentorship program (Jessie mentioned a local restaurant owner as a possibility)

A way to go about setting up a mentorship program as well as providing support to local entrepreneurs would be to create a co-operative business association that would be set up as a non-profit organization. Could be a sort of Aboriginal Chamber of Commerce

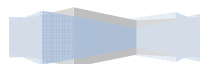
What are the next steps to make this happen?

- Tap into the greater network of circles for a co-operative business plan
- Sell memberships
- Recognition of cultural similarities despite political differences, and traditional trade routes as a beginning.

What should we name it? What should the mission statement be?

- 'Greater Victoria \_\_\_\_\_ Board of Trade' was suggested
- Decided as a group that a Chinook word would be used in the title

Finally, we addressed the question of measures: How to measure the benefits of Aboriginal business to the economy?



### Appendix 3: Contact List for Victoria Learning Circle

Charles Horn (Independent scholar): [charleshorn@shaw.ca](mailto:charleshorn@shaw.ca)  
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