

Lillooet is Learning

Located on the bench lands of the Fraser River, the town of Lillooet is part of British Columbia's southern interior. Only two hours from Whistler, though at a considerably lower elevation (250 metres versus Whistler's 2,182 metres), Lillooet's hot, sunny climate and hilly topography make it a very attractive place to live, but a tricky place to sell to potential investors and tourists. "We're not coastal, we're not north, we're not adjacent to any large urban

centres – we lack brand name identification," says Catherine Schulmann, Chairman of the Lillooet Learning Communities Society.

The Lillooet area has a population of 4,500; half are First Nations people. The modern town was the site of one of the earliest Aboriginal settlements established in the BC interior. More recently designated 'Mile Zero' of the Gold Rush Trail, Lillooet was one of the biggest miners' settlements in BC during the late 1800s.

Despite the benefits of a pleasant climate and a colourful history, Lillooet is struggling to establish a solid economic base for future prosperity. Until 2001, more than 500 townspeople were employed directly in the forestry industry. At that time, the provincial forestry ministry began reducing the size of its satellite offices. Before downsizing, the forestry office in Lillooet had a staff of 60 employees; only four remain. Fewer than 250 Lillooet residents now work in the forestry industry, and the sense of security that used to accompany employment in this sector has been eroded. These

Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) created the Office of Learning Technologies (OLT) in 1996, in order to encourage innovative, technology-based learning. HRDC staff and representatives from the (then) British Columbia Ministry of Community Development, Cooperatives and Volunteers, in cooperation with community leaders, tailored an OECD model to incorporate lifelong learning concepts and lessons from the learning cities work carried out in the UK. This Caledon series of community stories profiles several communities in BC that secured OLT funds in order to strengthen and extend their community capacities to deal with socioeconomic challenges.

days there are a lot of houses for sale in Lillooet; residents with portable skills have left for healthier economic centres. Many of those who have chosen to remain need to upgrade their education and develop new skills to help them secure jobs or start their own businesses.

Proposals for change

In 1999, a diverse group of social service professionals, citizens, educators and representatives from the Aboriginal community began to look for ways to improve Lillooet's prospects. They submitted an application for proposal development funding to Human Resources Development Canada's Office of Learning Technologies (OLT) office. In what turned out to be a defining coincidence, one of the five local Native bands submitted a parallel application at exactly the same time. OLT staff contacted both organi-

zations to let them know the situation and, at that point, the two groups came together and submitted a second, successful bid. "It's amazing that in such a small town, people can become so insulated," says Norm Leech, Community Chief of the T'it'q'et band whose reserve lands encircle Lillooet.

Betty Weaver and Alice Kidd were hired to develop the community proposal, a process document which presented several ideas for improving the social and economic conditions of their town. One focus of the proposed project was to address the educational needs of Lillooet's adult population. Many townspeople have found themselves at high risk for continued unemployment. Low graduation rates from high school, historical issues around the effects of residential schools and the realities of living in an isolated rural community have led many people to feel that they are unable to adapt to new social and economic conditions.



View of Lillooet.

In 2001, the OLT awarded the Lillooet Learning Community Partnership Project a three-year contribution agreement to advance its educational and community-building goals. Known now as simply 'Lillooet Learns,' the project's first phase ended in December 2003. Betty Weaver was hired as the Special Projects Coordinator.

During the project's first year, Betty helped complete a needs analysis which identified two major themes: families required continuing encouragement and support in their roles as parents, and residents requested better access to upgrading opportunities. Fortunately, provincial and federal departments already had done much work in the area of supporting families. The Lillooet Learns project supplemented existing programs by providing training opportunities and funding resources, and by encouraging cooperation and partnerships. However, as family support projects take effect and families gain strength, their members come to see that an isolated, economically insecure lifestyle will not keep the community vibrant. Lillooet Learns is now focusing more of its energies on the second theme identified in the needs study – support for adult learners.

In this era of changing markets, Canadians are reminded regularly that they must develop a wide variety of skills. Betty reports: "Distance education courses are the only options for adult learners in our community. Over the last decade, the University College of the Caribou [located in Kamloops] has offered courses at our satellite campus in Lillooet, but to make it financially viable, they require 12 or more students in each class and that's not always feasible. We will continue to try new ideas for course presentation."

Learning by correspondence takes a lot of dedication, motivation and confidence. At a minimum, people need someone to talk to when they get stuck – someone with enough skills

to get them past their difficulties. At this time, Lillooet's Educational Coordinator, Lorain Hupman, is providing that kind of expertise.

Community initiatives

Besides promoting education, Lillooet Learns is working to build community networks. Very similar programs are being offered and funded by federal and provincial organizations with very little communication or connection established among these side-by-side undertakings. The OLT's Learning Communities initiative brought a number of provincial players to the table, but these members changed after the 2001 provincial election and some departments were reorganized. A ministry whose mission included community development work was reformulated and the community tasks were orphaned – no provincial ministry currently is assuming responsibility for this type of undertaking. Lillooet community members have continued to meet with provincial representatives to promote a comprehensive community approach. "We've seen a few cracks in the silos, but we still have a long way to go," reflects Norm Leech.

The community has learned that it cannot rely on governments to continue funding projects forever. With their budgets shrinking, professionals and people working in human service fields recognized the need to work more cooperatively. In small communities like Lillooet, it is impossible to run big projects, but important to encourage pockets of expertise. In 2003, Lillooet Learns staff spent a great deal of time setting up meetings for professionals and citizens to work on cooperative ventures.

One success has been a loosely-knit collection of people concerned with changing community attitudes towards drinking and drug use. "This was an issue which cut across silos,

bringing in aspects of health, education and employment,” says Betty. “People became aware of what others were doing on the reserves and in town and how they could combine their efforts.”

In what may become a pattern for future projects, the key step was to get people together to define the problem, present the available resources, introduce those who had been working on the issue and identify possible routes forward. Funds to support the work were made available from a provincial safe streets/safe schools initiative. A fetal alcohol spectrum committee already was doing its best to find ways to get the community to work with affected families by raising awareness about the problem. It is hoped that once the effects of this syndrome are better

understood, other groups will come forward to help the families involved. The safe streets/safe schools funds will cover the costs of an educational carnival which is being designed to attract full family participation and change local attitudes towards drugs and alcohol.

Betty had her faith in Lillooet’s community spirit reaffirmed during a recent cooperative effort to raise awareness of cultural differences. A Multicultural Day offered a casual, supportive learning opportunity for breaking down long-held stereotypes.

“The event revived my belief that it’s possible for people in Lillooet to chip in and do things for themselves,” says Betty. “Ninety per-



Young and older carpenters enjoyed Lillooet's 2003 Children's Festival.

cent of the food and clothing were donated and models volunteered their time for the event. We'd like to be able to establish sufficient funds so that we don't have to rely completely on volunteerism, but it came as a wonderful reaffirmation that residents wanted to help and were committed to their community."

Similarly, a network of capable people decided to reintroduce a children's festival. These and a variety of other events have increased the number of family-friendly outings available to Lillooet residents. Establishing a roster of annual celebrations helps build community pride and encourages the development and deepening of relationships.

The Lifelong Learning Centre

Time and time again, community members have affirmed how important it is for them to establish a lifelong learning center. For now, Lillooet Learns is making formal learning opportunities available and finding ways to fund equipment, space and support staff.

In the future, project planners advocate a broader vision of education for the area. While many people in Lillooet recognize and validate the formal educational system, they ignore or fail to recognize the importance of experiential learning and volunteerism. By undervaluing their own skills, individuals may be depriving their community of precious resources.

In praise of librarians

In many communities, including Lillooet, librarians have been in the vanguard of improvements in information exchange and education. Lillooet Area Library Association (LALA) recently was featured in the Canadian Library Association's *Feliciter* magazine for its successes in engaging the trust and respect of members of the area's First Nations community.

Combining the goals of promoting early childhood reading skills and Internet learning, library staff have been implementing programs over the last 10 years which also have increased understanding of, and respect for, the Northern St'at'imc culture. These activities include increasing the First Nations' collection of books, videos and tapes; an early literacy and book translation program which provides new babies with gifts of books in English and St'at'imc; a books and materials lending program that distributes well-stocked kits of books, toys, tapes and cassettes to reserve preschools; and monthly preschool story times at the library.

Internet training in the summer is offered by university students who bring hardware and software borrowed from provincial library services to four reserve band offices. Basic training in Internet research, website creation, e-mail, children's sites and Internet commerce help prepare computer neophytes for further courses and services offered at the library in Lillooet.

"This new breed of technologically competent librarians clearly understand the pivotal role they play in the development of learning communities," says Ron Faris, a consultant and advocate of lifelong learning who was instrumental in helping prepare Lillooet's OLT submission. "Librarians bring a social conscience to their work, which blends perfectly with community development initiatives. They represent an ideal combination of education, technical training and community responsibility." Move over, Marian – a new breed of librarians is redefining your profession!

Ultimately, Betty hopes that the community can establish a permanent learning centre whose staff will maintain a community resource directory which will list skills of all types. “We want to know who has a doctorate in biology, who can teach you to tan a hide, plant and garden or advise you on raising a baby,” says Betty.

Reading the tea leaves

Divining Lillooet’s future is no easy task. Some townspeople believe that logging will again save the economic day, or at least return to a level which will keep local businesses comfortable. From the logging companies’ perspective, however, more regulations and higher costs, combined with Lillooet’s mountainous topography, mean that existing timber stock is increasingly expensive to harvest and provides a diminishing return for investment. The easy fruit already has been picked.

As local forestry jobs disappear, other local services are reduced. Social, child and family development programs are becoming regionalized. The automation of mill operations has resulted in fewer, less secure jobs. Some in Lillooet are hoping that tourism will act as another economic base for community renewal, but new businesses are expensive to set up, banks are now more cautious about lending, and the number of people who are interested in going out on an economic limb for an untried idea are few.

“What we really need to do is dream the dreams and make them happen,” says Betty Weaver. Change is happening; the question is how to support and encourage new ideas and develop the skills to bring them to fruition.

The immediate future

In the next year, project managers are hoping they can find a way to make Lillooet Learns a self-supporting operation. What is missing at this time is a profit-generation mechanism that will make it possible to pay both for distance education and run the type of learning center that the community gradually has begun to envision. This would include a small business development center and for-profit youth training programs.

One of the hurdles facing Lillooet is finding people with the business acumen and the time to put together a business plan for immediate implementation. Business training courses will prepare people to undertake such tasks in the longer term, but the time for action is now. To that end, Lillooet Learns board members are involved in the Community Development Action Plan, another opportunity to break down the barriers and work out ideas among groups that need to cooperate with one another.

Says Betty: “One of the benefits of hard times is that, as long as you can avoid finger-pointing, people tend to pull together. Poor people can’t afford to go it alone, and our situation has made us realize that we need one another.”

Lessons learned

Despite the amount of time it takes, getting and giving feedback and information at every stage is critically important, particularly during the planning stages. Without constantly checking in with the groups involved, projects can be undermined and money wasted. Organizers have learned to go to where the people are, spend time

with them and find the message that makes it possible for people to share their ideas. Coffee klatches with people working in the field often yielded the best input in the project's early days.

Once activities got under way, it became more difficult to engineer casual get-togethers where people felt they really could be heard. Meetings which present dry facts are unpopular, but community members are eager to be speak if they feel the listeners are truly interested. This type of fluid communication requires leadership that possesses the tools for sifting through a host of ideas and finding consensus.

Many rich relationships have been forged and strengthened since the initial OLT submission was made in 2000. Many more silos and hurdles will have to be overcome before a successful, healthy future for Lillooet's children is assured, but a collective will now exists to improve the town's social and economic prospects. Harnessing that will and creating a shared vision for prosperity is Lillooet's next challenge.

Anne Makhoul

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The project website is at www.lillooetlearns.ca

Reference

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