

Learning Communities in the Monashee

The Village of Lumby is one of a cluster of communities located at the base of the Monashee Mountains in BC, east of Vernon. The forestry industry has been the Monashee region's main employer since goldminers traded their pans for axes in the late 1800s. In 1997, the provincial government conducted a forest workers needs assessment to identify ways to help people whose jobs had disappeared as a result of recent layoffs and mill closures. Results indicated that Monashee residents wanted training

opportunities to upgrade their skills and develop new ones.

In 2000, the idea of establishing a learning network among the communities of Lumby, Cherryville, Mabel Lake, Lavington and Whitevale began to gather momentum after (then) Mayor of Lumby, Joanne Kineshanko, met with provincial government representatives to discuss the closure of local large mills and smaller value-added operations. Members of Lumby's Whitevalley Community Resource Centre board and other interested representatives from the education and business sectors came together to plan for the establishment of a learning centre. A submission was made to the Office of Learning Technology's (OLT) Learning Communities Initiative, and approval was granted for a three-year project. Work began in August 2000.

Part of the OLT funding would be used to research the possibility of establishing a Shared Use Wood Processing Facility (SUF) in Lumby. This project would create employment by supporting the area's value-added wood industry in numerous ways. As it was envisioned, the SUF

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.

would include a forest products incubation facility where potential entrepreneurs would be given the business and equipment training they needed to develop new ideas and establish their own businesses. Local companies would be able to lease industry standard equipment to update their products and manufacturing processes. Instructors would provide training for people who wished to pursue specialty markets, such as the manufacture of furniture for people with disabilities.

From the start, the learning centre and SUF projects were conceptualized as two halves of the same whole – acting in concert to provide a base for the area’s economic revitalization. Says Steve Elliman, a Lumby resident who has been very involved in community development initiatives: “The Shared Use Facility was an ambitious undertaking for a town the size of Lumby [population 1,200]. The surrounding area is home to roughly 4,400 people so our planning process included attracting both local

industry and businesses from outside the Monashee. The SUF would fit well with the culture, skills and ideals of the local population.”

Project development

The goal of the learning portion of the Monashee Learning Communities initiative was to instill a lifelong learning culture within the region using existing infrastructure, new technological tools and community partnerships [Allen 2003]. Activities would include creating a comprehensive, community-responsive training facility, building a versatile team of instructors with technical and industry expertise, and using the Internet to promote local businesses. Organizers decided to use the Whitevalley Community Resource Centre as the proponent for the project. They named their portion of the facility the Monashee Learning and Training Centre (MLTC) in order to make it clear that they were including all local settlements in the undertaking, and to



View of Lumby.

distinguish the project from work already under way at the community resource centre.

While Steve Elliman and others began laying the groundwork for the SUF business plan, the Learning Community organizers – Harry Adam, Gay Jewitt, Cyril Hopkins, Louise Danskin and Don Bigelow – established the project’s steering committee, began identifying community partners and conducted research which would guide the development of learning initiatives. A syllabus of MLTC course offerings was distributed to 2,000 households in the Monashee and work was done to establish an evaluation framework for the Learning Communities project. A well-received Learning Conference took place in Vernon at the end of 2001, hosted and organized by the MLTC, which made innovative use of computer technology. Lumby students crafted a digital sound and video tapestry of the event and made it available online. The event was so successful that the MLTC team was asked to produce a ‘how-to’ guide.

The second year of the project focused on completing the business plan for the SUF and on establishing a computer lab in a building adjacent to the Whitevalley Community Centre. Funds were released from Lumby Village Council to support the latter endeavor, since it tied in very well with the identified technology training needs of local students and business owners. The lab opened to great fanfare in April 2002. A service learning opportunity was offering to high school students interested in developing websites for local businesses. Three students took advantage of the opportunity and developed 14 such sites.

A change in direction

Due to a series of unforeseen political and social events – increased tariffs on softwood

lumber exports to the US, a change in provincial government, and community divisions and upheaval suffered as a result of increasing unemployment – the SUF plans were set aside near the end of the OLT project’s second year. Unfortunately, this development meant that the MLTC’s future also was called into question. New profit-generating partners would be needed in order for the centre to pay its expenses once OLT funding ended.

Harry Adam was the principal of J.W. Inglis Elementary School in 2000 and he was deeply involved in the preliminary discussions that led to the Learning Communities project. Says Harry: “Despite the SUF setback, the community had already begun to rely on the learning centre’s course offerings and the staff’s ability to meet their learning needs. The process of adopting a lifelong learning attitude was already under way.”

The steering committee that was established at the project outset was dismantled soon after the SUF plans were postponed. Committee members agreed to continue to provide assistance, as requested. MLTC staff formed a replacement steering committee, which focused more on community representation and this structure remained in place until the conclusion of OLT funding in September 2003.

During the project’s final year, program staff broadened their partnership activities and began researching the possibility of organizing Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs)¹ training, a burgeoning industry in central and eastern BC. It was felt that the MLTC needed an exclusive focus and NTFPs seemed to offer a strong possibility for success. Meetings began with representatives from Royal Roads University in Victoria which had developed an NTFP program. Later, members of the Okanagan Indian Band – with whom MLTC were already in



MLTC staff past and present (left to right): Todd Montgomery, Pat Pointer, Nina Labelle, Gay Jewitt, Wendy Gilbert, Mike Cripps and Steve Elliman.

discussion regarding their training needs – were approached as possible partners.

Says Steve Elliman: “The end of the 2002 project year brought with it many unsettling changes which had an impact on the remainder of the Learning Communities work. The new provincial government’s lack of support for community initiatives saw more responsibility being loaded onto an already overburdened core of volunteers and we were unsuccessful in the time remaining to us to arrive at a workable plan for economic sustainability.”

For some time, Lumby residents had considered establishing the town as a hub for training excellence and they envisioned the possibility of establishing Lumby as a model of a nature-based community. Numerous projects have been suggested and many were outlined in the “Lumby and Area Economic Development Action Plan”[Gosal 1999] and in an ecotourism

gap analysis completed in December 2000, but as yet, no comprehensive plan has been formulated for long-term growth.

Lesson learned by the MLTC

The concept of lifelong learning has achieved widespread community acceptance. Despite the fact that OLT project funds ended in December 2003, residents continue to submit requests for MLTC training courses.

Says Steve: “The most beneficial thing to come out of the OLT work is that we have changed the community’s attitude towards lifelong learning and the MLTC. People in the Monashee now see that we are here for them and that we can respond quickly and cost-effectively to their needs. This type of responsive programming is not always possible when using the services of institutions from outside the

community. Local groups are now calling on us for service but, unfortunately, we are not yet self-sustaining and we have little time left to accomplish this goal. It works best when learning facilities are included as part of an overall community plan, providing assistance and resources to community sectors as their education and training needs emerge. Also, I believe it is unrealistic to expect formal educational institutions to support community learning networks (CLNs). Despite the excellent relationship between MLTC and its educational partners, local institutions are experiencing their own challenges with regard to operational funding.”

MLTC staff have become adept at developing streamlined curricula for local businesses, and in 2003 they delivered six specific courses requested by groups in the community, including ‘Food Safe’ (a sanitation program for food handlers), Level One First Aid and a carpentry course. Their computer courses continue to be popular with people of all ages and ability levels. The computer lab itself was moved into Crossroads, the school district’s alternative learning facility. Two members of MLTC staff were temporarily housed at Crossroads, allowing the organization to save money on rent and reduce overhead costs. In exchange, MLTC staff built a website for the school district’s alternate learning program, promoting online continuing education.

Organizers felt that the MLTC’s low profile made it difficult for the project to gain acceptance and credibility at the local level. It took MLTC staff a long time to convince residents that their work was separate from Whitevalley Community Centre activities, let alone identify themselves as a piece of a larger, federal initiative. “Marketing has to be continuous for this type of community development paradigm to really take hold,” says Gay Jewitt, Executive Director of the Whitevalley Community Resource Centre.

Now at the end of the project’s three-year run, MLTC staff have greatly refined their course design and marketing abilities. They have achieved their goal of making technology more widely available, and their project website has acted as a handy community bulletin board resource.

In retrospect, organizers recognize that a five-year program funding cycle would have provided them the time they needed to make the transition from planning to self-sufficiency. “Establishing partnerships is a long, complex activity,” says Gay Jewitt. “Finding the right combination of personalities and meshing organizational goals is time-consuming. Project staff learned to look beyond local organizations for partnership, when necessary.”

What lies ahead

At the end of the three-year learning committee project, MLTC staff secured a six-month contract with the OLT to investigate possible components that could assist community learning networks with future sustainability. Called “Network of Networks,” it will focus on connecting community learning networks and the sharing of skills and resources, program models and ideas. The program will run from November 2003 until May 2004.

The Village of Lumby has continued to look for ways to attract new business to the area, including giving its downtown a facelift. Human Resources Development Canada funds were used to help renovate properties and local residents were hired to do the design and construction work. Lumby’s former Mayor, Joanne Kineshanko, continues to be optimistic about the area’s ability to coordinate a sound strategy for economic and social sustainability. Says Joanne: “The town’s recent main street revitali-

zation project is the sort of enterprise that helps people focus on building a better future. We have all the expertise and ideas we need to survive – our challenge is to work together to create a vision for our economic future which builds on the lifelong learning lessons and community strengths we now possess.”

Anne Makhoul

Anne Makhoul coordinates the ‘community stories’ series for the Caledon Institute of Social Policy.

Steve Elliman can be reached by telephone at (250)547-8866.

The MLTC website is at: www.monashee.com/mltc

The Internet Continuing Education web site built by MLTC can be found at: www.iceonline.ca

The 2001 Learning Conference’s Digital Tapestry can be viewed at: www.monahsee.com/learning

Endnote

1. Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) are part of the growing movement which sees Canada’s forests as sources of a wide variety of plant products which can be harvested at a sustainable rate. Items which can be eaten, turned into medicines, used in the floral industry or as inspirations for art are examples of NTFPs.

References

Allen, H. (2003). “MLTC Final Report and Evaluation.” Lumby, BC: Imagine-Ere Consulting.

Gosal, K. (1999). “Lumby and Area Economic Development Action Plan.” Golden, BC: Storm Rider Enterprises.

Copyright © 2004 by The Caledon Institute of Social Policy

1600 Scott Street, Suite 620
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1Y 4N7
Phone: (613) 729-3340
Fax: (613) 729-3896
E-mail: caledon@caledoninst.org
Website: www.caledoninst.org