

Community Development in the Upper Skeena: Death Feasts and Transformative Change

Recent events in the remote traditional territories of the Gitxsan First Nation in north-western BC provide a striking example of the conditions that dictate why an Integrating Model for community economic development (CED), learning and social change is essential for the community's survival.

People die before their time in the Upper Skeena. In a recent two-week span, five people living in or near the Village of Hazelton, population 345, died. Four of the

five were middle aged. Compared to the provincial lifespan averages for men and women (76 and 81, respectively), the early deaths of these residents represent more than 100 lost years – a significant figure for a small community in which human resources are stretched to the breaking point. These five people all were of Gitxsan ancestry, part of the 80 percent majority living in the two municipalities, seven reserves and several unincorporated areas in the upper reaches of the Skeena River watershed.

Customs of the local dominant Gitxsan culture – a hereditary system based on matrilineal ascendancy – require three to five days of formal grieving, business and feasting (also known as potlatches) after each death. Extensive kinship ties and associated cultural responsibilities involve hundreds of people. Five deaths meant that the few employed people in the area – the unofficial unemployment rate is in the 90 percent range – had obligations around the death feasts. Very little work, according to the mainstream economic definition, was accomplished for the better part of three weeks.

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.

The living conditions which contributed to the lost years, and the kinship ties which are integral to the death feasts, are two of the driving forces that helped shape the Integrating Model for CED, learning and social change. This model was articulated by Storytellers' Foundation, a registered nonprofit society based in the Gitxsan traditional territories. The model emphasizes the importance of relationships, the value of local knowledge, the need to connect action to community conditions and the capacity of community members to learn from each other as essential components of creating a healthy, sustainable community.

Anne Docherty and Doug Donaldson formed the Storytellers' Foundation in 1994 after working for 15 years in the areas of education, social capital and economic development in northwestern BC. They had

seen for themselves the lack of results from governments spending millions of dollars on approaches to human and economic development ill-suited to the community. They believed there was a better way – one rooted in Gitxsan and settler culture and based on the importance of relationships with the land, in this area of glaciated mountains and lush rainforests approximately 300 kilometres inland from Prince Rupert.

During the past ten years, Storytellers' Foundation has undertaken research, planning and project work that allowed them to understand and describe the Integrating Model inherent – but not always practised – in their communities. Everyone involved with the foundation lives and works in the area; it is their home. All of the Storytellers' Foundation Board of Directors are from the Gitxsan territories. This home sense was



Mount Stekyoden (Gitxsan for “stand alone”) dominates the landscape in the southern part of the 30,000 square kilometre traditional territories in northwestern BC.

fundamental in the process of articulating the Integrating Model, in which one of the key ingredients is an emphasis on the importance of relationships – kinship with one another and connectedness to the land – that is the foundation of Gitxsan and settler culture.

Some of the Foundation’s recent work allowed Anne and Doug to explore more fully how the model works within the Upper Skeena communities and how it may be of use to other remote, rural communities. Through a partnership project with the Upper Skeena Development Centre, the Foundation secured funding from the Office of Learning Technologies (OLT) for a three-year action research project. Its purpose was to explore how the use of learning as an organizing principle helps mobilize and engage people as citizens, workers and family members in creating a healthy, sustainable community.

The project built upon the values, visions and way of life of the people in the Upper Skeena and allowed Foundation staff to better articulate and apply the Integrating Model with community partners. The diverse partners that emerged from this project allowed for community capacity building initiatives that were truly rooted in the community. Over the three-year period, 150 community partners were established – the key partners that have continued to work together include the Upper Skeena Development Centre, Storytellers’ Foundation, the Village of Hazelton municipal government, Hazelton Secondary School, Gitxsan and Wet’suwet’en Education Society, Hazelton and District Public Library, Mercedes Beans and Model Teas (a local coffee and gift shop) and the Gitxsan Treaty Society.

Through these diverse partnerships, Storytellers’ staff have learned to appreciate the power and effectiveness of an integrating approach in which taking the time to build relationships and allow community conditions to inform the work results in initiatives that last beyond the life of any one project. The three-year action research process sponsored by OLT has resulted in learning outcomes and project outcomes. Both are equally important in that the learning enables partners to reflect and shift practices, and the projects allow for social and economic movement in a community that is fighting off a sense of hopelessness and passivity. Key learning outcomes include finding ways to build partnerships and make connections among educational, private, public, voluntary and civic sectors; how to use learning technologies to promote collaborative learning and connect learning with social and economic development; how to design learning initiatives that respond and anticipate community conditions rather than using a prescribed curriculum; and developing strategies and skills for lifelong learning and citizenship.

Projects that emerged and have continued after the life of the project include: ‘The Learning Shop’ (a storefront informal education centre), experiential education programs for youth struggling with literacy and work skills, information technology initiatives to support economic development (e.g., a Gitxsan language CD-ROM, the Delgamuukw Virtual Museum of Canada Exhibit), service learning and action research projects for in-school and out-of-school youth, mentorship programs for young people entering the world of work, and mentorship and apprenticeship programs for adults who work with youth.

Foundation members see themselves as educators rather than community economic developers – people who use learning to develop passions, knowledge and skills, and to help people organize themselves for the common good of the community. Although the Foundation performs many tasks, staff see learning as an organizing principle that can awaken their human, social, cultural and economic potential.

Specific projects are developed in response to conditions in the community. In recent years, the Foundation has:

- conducted research and development in response to a need to articulate and organize community values and socio-economic visions
- animated discussions and workshops in response to the community's concern that

youth be helped to 'wake up' to their passions and reconnect with family and community

- modelled and encouraged local economic development by purchasing the building from which they operate and by promoting the downtown revitalization of Hazelton
- acted as a catalyst for change by publishing a provocative and alternative newspaper that challenges people to become active citizens rather than assuming they are already engaged
- provided facilitation services for organizations that wish to come together to build relationships that include trust, reciprocity and respect.



Two Gitksan hereditary chiefs confer at a potlach amongst coastal First Nations of the northwest.

Foundation staff have organized their work into three key areas for the next three years, based on their understanding of present and future community conditions. These are:

- working with the Gitxsan and Wet'-suwet'en Education Society and the Gitxsan Treaty Society to encourage the use of information technology to help with digitization and promotion of the Gitxsan worldview, culture and language, and the advancement of the knowledge economy in an oral culture
- organizing the Rural Roots Northern Learning Network, which has a membership of 89 community educators (young and old) who are taking local action to promote and validate rural living
- operating the Foundation's storefront informal education centre, 'The Learning Shop,' which brings together youth and adult mentors and encourages them to organize themselves as they strive for personal and political change.

There are many challenges facing Foundation staff; many of these are separate from the work they do inside the community. These include working within the constraints of funding programs which do not allow for an integrating approach, finding skilled local people who can maintain projects while capacity building work takes place and finding the time to communicate program, success to the outside world without neglecting the work itself.

So how does all this relate to lost person-years and death feasts? It draws attention to community conditions in the Upper Skeena and to the importance of local knowledge. It emphasizes that relationship – whether with each other, with the land or both – is the basis of community and that people learn best when they learn from each other. These principles are the heart of the Integrating Model for CED, learning and social change. Ignoring them is a recipe for failure – a continuation of the dominant model in which outside forces decide and evaluate which projects work for rural communities. For rural people living on the edge of social and economic disaster, that waste of time can mean the difference between a future and the loss of a way of life.

Doug Donaldson and Anne Docherty

Doug Donaldson and Anne Docherty are co-founders of the Storytellers' Foundation. They live in Hazelton.

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