



Pan-Canadian Community Development Learning Network Profile of Effective Practice



Storytellers' Foundation

Context

Storytellers' Foundation is based in the upper Skeena River region in northwest BC. The region is home to 14 distinct communities all located on the traditional territories of the Gitksan First Nation, approximately 300 kilometres inland from Prince Rupert on BC's northwest coast. About 5,000 people live in two municipalities Hazelton, and New Hazelton, seven reserves, two non-incorporated settlements and three valleys. These communities are all situated in the 30,000 square kilometres of area known as the Upper Skeena. The Gitksan First Nation makes up almost 80% of the population with most of the remainder of Western European descent.

This Profile of Effective Practice is one of fifteen stories examining how innovative, community-based initiatives are using comprehensive approaches to improve social and economic conditions on a local level.

The profiles were prepared as part of a 2.5-year project of the Canadian CED Network looking at the links between social inclusion and community economic development.

For other profiles, more information on the project and additional resources on social inclusion and CED, see the notes at the end of this document.

The communities of the Upper Skeena are set in a land of lush, temperate rainforests, snow-capped mountains, salmon-bearing rivers and abundant natural resources. The diverse and distinct communities create a sense of belonging and give the local people a sense of identity and pride. There is a deep and inherent relationship between people, based on kin, and between people and the land. These relationships have evolved from a more than 10,000 year history of Gitksan living on the territories and from a strong, century-old, settler history which includes a culture of belonging to place.

Traditional economies based on bartering, trading and reciprocity were dominant until very recently in the Upper Skeena. The new economies, based on an industrial model of large-scale resource extraction and cash remuneration, are less than five decades old. The combined effects of colonialism, industrialization and



Traditional territory of the Gitksan, covering the Upper Skeena area in northwest British Columbia, appears in yellow in the map above -- a rugged, beautiful and remote region. Map: Gord Wilson, Photo: Doug Donaldson



corporatism have culminated in widespread impoverishment in the communities of the Upper Skeena. The current socioeconomic indicators are some of the worst in BC and include extreme unemployment rates (more than 90% in some communities with a 60% overall rate), a failed formal education system (28% have less than high school graduation – almost twice the provincial average), deteriorating infrastructure (32% of houses in need of major repair, quadruple the BC average), and a health care and wellness crisis (residents are four times as likely to die from medically treatable diseases as in a standard population). Demographically, the Upper Skeena contains a very high youth population, with 70% under the age of 30 – twice the provincial average.

Despite such dire socioeconomic indicators, the resiliency of the local population stemming from connection to the land and connection to kin is apparent. The people of the Upper Skeena expressed a need to learn to work together and a need to support the youth population – areas that community members were worried were being lost compared to historical practice due to the recent socioeconomic influences.

History

Storytellers' Foundation was created in 1994, after witnessing the lack of results from external sources investing millions of dollars into conventional approaches to human and economic development. It was created in the belief that there must be a better way based on

systems rooted in Gitksan and Settler cultures. The founders had observed and experienced over the years that informal learning was flourishing in the Upper Skeena and supporting it was the local answer to a better approach for human and economic development. The informal learning structures were well organized based on the relationship to the land and kin.

In the mid to late 1990's, Storytellers' Foundation carried out community research to allow the people living in the Upper Skeena communities to articulate their values and to express a collaborative vision for their socioeconomic future. Much of this research was in anticipation of the collapse of the already fragile forest extraction industry. Many in the communities understood the cyclical nature of this industry and understood that a final collapse was soon to happen, resulting in mass unemployment. As Storytellers' undertook this research, they discovered several key

Storytellers' Foundation

Year Incorporated – 2000 (founded and activities commenced in 1995)

Mission – To foster personal and political mobilization through the development of an active citizenry so that the Upper Skeena and Gitksan nation can further define its social and economic destiny.

Overview

- Evolved from working with Gitksan hereditary chiefs in 1994-96 treaty process
- Applied for charitable tax status in 2006
- Three staff paid part-time but working full-time hours
- Up to eight casual staff paid part-time, volunteering part-time

pieces of knowledge about the communities to which they belong:

"The region where we live is abundant in natural resources and the human resource is fully integrated in to this natural system. People here want to be connected to the land and they want to work in connection to the land.

The region where we live is built on connection and relationship between people and between people and the land. People here know how to live in one place. People know how to work together and they know how to work with the land to live a sustenance lifestyle. We also learned that our most recent socioeconomic history has created the current disconnect with this knowledge and daily practice.

People are fully aware they must work together for survival of this lifestyle. People want to learn how to work together and yet remain autonomous and diverse. Our communities are unique and diverse. People are fiercely proud of where they live. It is what unites us and separates us at the same time.

Even when the resource industry is booming we have a high unemployment rate. Many in our population are jobless and impoverished. Jobs alone will not create change. We believe that long-term oppression means long-term capacity and mobilization development to change this socioeconomic reality."

These discoveries allowed Storytellers' to create community learning strategies to begin to address the deeper, underpinning reasons that prevent Upper Skeena communities from flourishing in this pristine natural environment. They designed an Integrating Approach to health and literacy based on the values and principles heard from local people, and their practices are rooted in the values and ways of learning of both the Gitksan and Settler populations of the Upper Skeena.

Storytellers' work is first and foremost about being citizens and is place-based. It situates CED in an ecological framework that recognizes diversity as essential for survival and connectedness of people to the land they live on as a cornerstone of sustainability. The goal of creating vibrant communities for all citizens, with a particular focus on youth, resonated with other community members in northwest BC. The result of this desire of people to work together was the catalyst for the Rural Roots Community Learning Network. The network has an active membership within, and between, the communities of the Upper Skeena, Smithers and Houston.



*Community members from both Gitksan and Settler populations come together to plan for the future.
Photo: Doug Donaldson*

Activities

1. Coordinating the Rural Roots Community Learning Network

The Community Learning Network is a regional body that supports community practitioners, NGO organizers and young adults to organize at the community level. There are four

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components to the coordinating work and together they demonstrate a comprehensive analysis to community economic development, specifically in the health-literacy fields.

Socio-cultural animation

Storytellers' staff work alongside Rural Roots members to animate the contextual realities and underpinnings that have led to current socioeconomic conditions. Animation is facilitated through value and indicator mapping; collaborative reflection-on-action focus groups; think-tanks; and popular education methods such as forum theatre, arts and technology. Storytellers' staff work alongside local practitioners while mentoring them in the techniques. Local practitioners are supported to use these techniques within their groups as well as in cross-sector community work.



One piece of artwork developed through socio-cultural animation activities.

Artwork: Leah Pipe

Program Development & Peer Learning

After animating community conditions, practitioners are supported to use this information and knowledge to design and evaluate programming. This information and knowledge is used to frame evaluation about both content and capacity. As practitioners shift content to address the conditions in the community, they also identify areas for skills development. Storytellers' then coordinates a series of peer learning events. In these sessions, members share knowledge and tools that address the skills gaps. Peer learning workshops run monthly over the winter and spring months.

Analysis and Research

Storytellers' designs tools and workshops to teach the Integrating Approach. This approach uses a comprehensive analysis that helps members recognize the interconnectedness of social, cultural and economic issues. Through workshops and tool development, Storytellers' supports members in using a comprehensive analysis so that their programming includes a comprehensive framework. These activities help members to articulate values, principles, goals and objectives within a conceptual framework. At three-month intervals, practitioners are brought together to describe lessons learned, identify innovative and creative programming, track indicators and plan programming changes to continue to address the underpinning reasons why programming was necessary in the first place.

Publishing and Communication

The final activity for Rural Roots is supporting practitioners to articulate messages about their practice. This is often connected with the analysis by getting practitioners to talk to the context surrounding their practice, the capacity within their practice, and the community and the impact such discoveries have on content design. These messages are then translated into communication between practitioners in the region, communication to external allies as well as being a catalyst for tool and resource development.



An article published in Northword, a magazine connecting BC's northwest communities. Screenshot: Northword Magazine web site

2. Youth Work

Storytellers' also works with community partners, particularly the Upper Skeena Development Centre, to offer informal learning opportunities for youth and adults who mentor youth. Within the Learning Shop (a storefront informal education centre) experiential programs are designed with youth to address social and health determinants identified by young people living in the Upper Skeena. The Learning Shop staff delivers these programs while mentoring other community practitioners to learn informal education approaches. Storytellers' also supports local service agencies to embed the programming within their operational mandate. This capacity building approach to youth work is creating a vibrant community of young leaders while increasing practitioner capacity to support young leaders to engage in a community with profound socioeconomic injustices.



Young adult peer educators at Storytellers' Foundation are mentored to support youth to move ideas into action in the community. Photo: Doug Donaldson

Participatory and Comprehensive Analysis

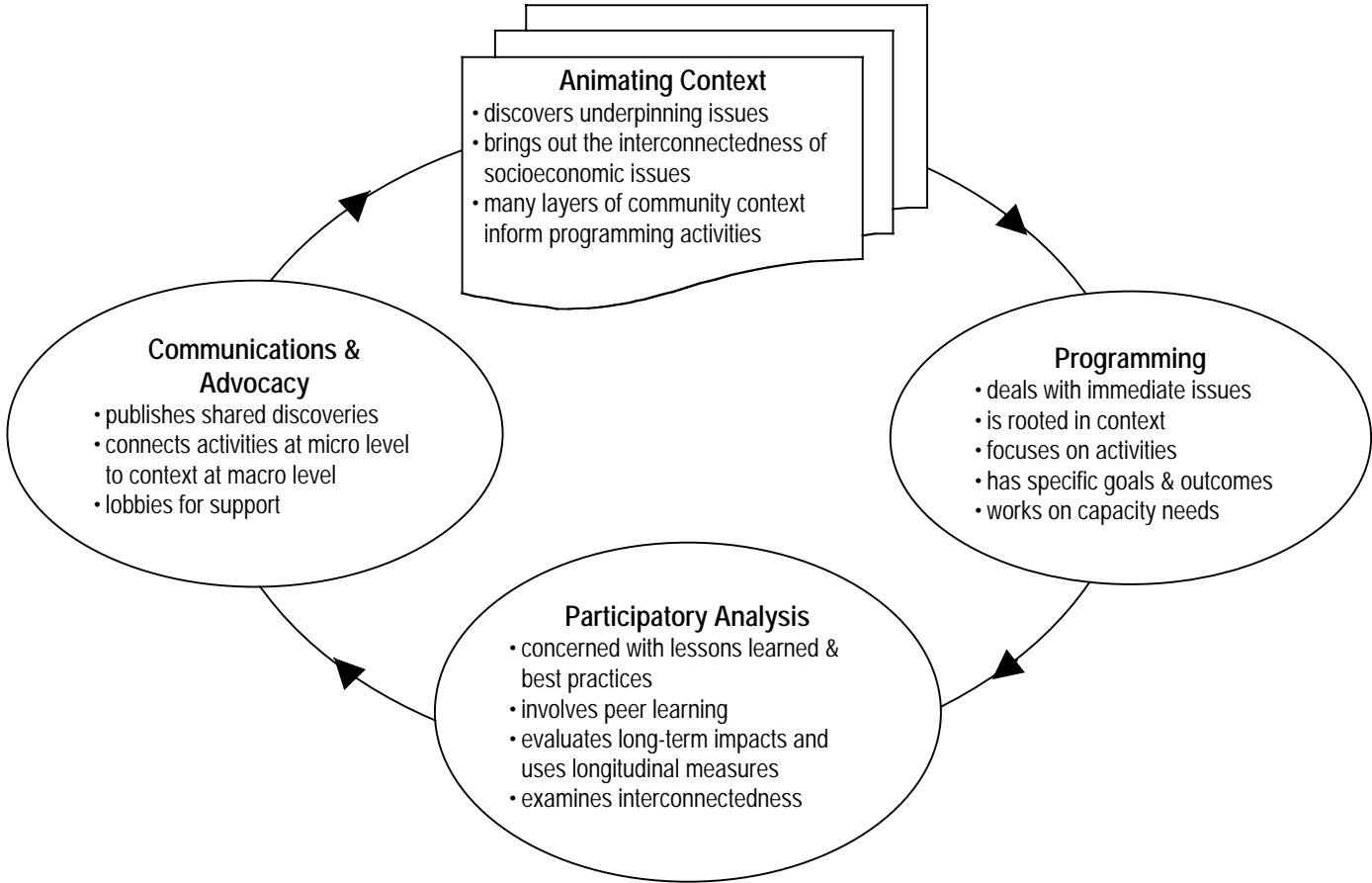
Storytellers' Foundation uses a comprehensive analysis to better understand the interconnectedness of the Rural Roots network and youth work with the broader social and economic issues of their community. This analysis is based on an ecological conceptual framework, which has evolved from the natural relationships between people in the community. The conceptual framework directs the approach and gives Storytellers' a set of values and principles that are constantly referred to at all levels of analysis and evaluation.

"We believe in diversity and we believe that it is only through diversity that healthy community can be constructed," said Storytellers' co-founder Anne Docherty.

The comprehensive analysis involves a series of feedback loops that help sort and organize the multi-dimensional elements of the work. They begin by pulling broader goals from the community values and socioeconomic indicators already identified in past socio-cultural animation work. These goals then direct activities to ensure that as the organization delivers programming, staff are continually evaluating its effectiveness – not just in achieving the immediate program goals, but also how they are impacting the underpinning issues that created the need for programming in the first place.

As Storytellers' evaluates programming, they track how they are learning more about their assets and issues within the socioeconomic context, the capacity of practitioners and participants and how this impacts program content.

After this evaluation, they then publish lessons learned through a variety of mediums depending on the target audience. Publishing usually includes an art piece, a print media article and an advocacy tool. As they publish and share their discoveries with others, invitations are issued to



join the exploration of the contextual issues that are the targets of change. And so continues the comprehensive analysis cycle.

Storyteller's analysis has been useful in: helping animate local values and visions; making visible the underpinning reasons why the socioeconomic issues exist in the first place; delivering programming that is rooted in local needs, gaps and opportunities while paying attention to external influences that impact local realities; conducting rigorous participatory evaluation; publishing lessons learned; communicating their discoveries with others; designing peer learning events; and animating the multi-dimensional aspects to community economic development activities.

This analysis process has evolved into the Integrating Approach which is both the framework for the Rural Roots Learning Network and the key activity of the network.

Outcomes and Evaluation

Storytellers' started with a community visioning session to guide their plans that they anticipate will follow a ten-year visioning cycle. Based on this vision, annual plans set immediate, mid-term and long-term outcomes. Every three months staff conduct a quarterly evaluation that uses the analysis framework to assess how programming activities have helped them learn more about context, content and capacity. Within each program activity, participatory evaluation methods are used to measure project successes, challenges and discoveries, following a standard participatory evaluation process. The evaluation from each program activity is then fed in to the analysis feedback loop. At an annual staff focus session, the organization charts how

programming evaluation is impacting the immediate, mid-term and long-term outcomes and this information is used in an analysis to inform goals for the next year.

By following a comprehensive analysis, Storytellers' has been able to identify what programming is efficient in changing contextual realities and what programming may create immediate change but is not long-lasting. Using this approach, staff have been able to design programming that is increasingly successful in shifting community awareness and changing current realities in the following areas:

Youth – Through a comprehensive analysis, Storytellers' has identified joblessness as a key barrier to a healthy youth population. As a result, they have been able to create programming that has increased the number of youth jobs in the community; created small-scale industry in community food systems; developed a pool of peer educators; and extended partnerships between agencies and organizations who have not traditionally worked together. The analysis also informs Storytellers' that if one of these agencies is not central by taking on a 'hub' organizing role, then individual agencies return to working in “silos” and effectiveness diminishes.



The Learning Shop, Storytellers' storefront informal education centre, where experiential programs are designed with youth to address social and health determinants identified by young people living in the Upper Skeena. Photo: Doug Donaldson

Community Organizing – The comprehensive analysis has also allowed Storytellers' to measure success and challenges far beyond any one program. Staff has learned that a critical barrier to overcoming today's socioeconomic issues is the widespread inability of community members to work together. The region's most recent history has created mistrust and fear within and between citizens, organizations and communities. By using a comprehensive analysis, Storytellers' has learned that current programming cannot expand unless capacity is built so that more citizens can take on leadership, management and program delivery roles.

Overall, Storytellers' evaluation suggests that in terms of long-term planning by local people, Rural Roots is efficient community organizing, is cost-effective, and builds cross-sector relationships while exploring their interconnectedness. This is done through intentional relationship building, which is needed for increased local and regional partnerships. They have also learned that successful youth programming demands mentorship within and beyond the program. In order to create a vibrant youth leadership, Storytellers' must train and mentor adults who are around youth to foster conditions that allow for personal and political power development.

The comprehensive analysis is crucial to this entire process. According to Docherty, Storytellers' director for community learning, "Without applying a comprehensive analysis, we would probably have continued to deliver programming that had immediate success, but we would not be addressing the underpinning issues at both the local level (capacity, relationship building, value-based practice) and at the macro level (policy, systems change, awareness)."

Success Factors and Policy Lessons

The initiatives Storytellers' supports are place-based. They stem from the values, visions, interactions and local knowledge of the people in the region. The key focus of their work is to support and foster conditions for people to work together, and to care for one another while working together. This feeds hope.

But Storytellers' struggles to secure funding for the “big picture” of their work. Like many local organizations trying to take a comprehensive approach, they end up having to 'cut and paste' the work to fit programming portfolios of government. The frustration is palpable for Docherty. "It is a shame that we cannot relate the innovative and creative organizing that lies behind specific programming. We miss out on an opportunity to engage in honest dialogue and inquiry about building on the assets of this region to help resolve the exclusion and suffering within the region."

Storytellers' co-founder Doug Donaldson notes, "We have learned that by working collaboratively and using comprehensive approaches, local practitioners and organizers are developing programming that is rooted in the values, history and future visions of place. We have learned how to ensure that the work is culturally appropriate to rural and land-based people."

Policy directs program delivery, but policy is always culturally laden. Policy is generally written for mainstream Canada – now the second most urban nation in the world. But the communities of the Upper Skeena are far from urban – they are remote-rural and/or aboriginal. Storytellers' worries that policy is written, and in turn, programming guidelines are developed, without their realities being considered. They find that these underpinning factors continually inhibit their ability to create place-based, local and value-based solutions, stemming from either a lack of will in policy direction to truly support community organizing at the local level, or a lack of recognition of the attention needed for relationship building to evolve into partnerships.

Success Factors

- Ensure there is time in programming for intentional relationship building with, and between, partners and potential partners.
- Invest time in reflective practice, giving a space for people to appreciate the interconnectedness of issues.
- Trust and commitment from government that local citizens can make their neighbourhoods inclusive, fair and just places to live – they simply need resource support to make this happen, not culturally contradictory guidelines created by far-removed decision makers.
- Engagement of the experiential community in development and implementation of programming guidelines and, ultimately, policy.

Unfortunately, making changes to policy is difficult when the residents of the Upper Skeena represent such a small population. As Docherty recognizes, "We are stretched thin; there are simply not enough of us to be able to launch a proactive campaign to engage with individuals at a level of government where decision-making is granted. We therefore work with front-line employees who are limited to the narrow mandate allotted to them. This makes for frustrating and disappointing partnerships with government."

Donaldson sums up Storyteller's predicament. "We have many successes because of the work of local people committed to their home. We have discovered community learning strategies that are rigorously accountable; cost-efficient, celebratory of diversity and are creating long-lasting solutions to profound socioeconomic issues and yet we cannot find a champion within government with the authority to support us with financial and human resource assistance. And yet, Rural Roots and the Youth Work continues because of the commitment of local citizens to make their community, and help make their neighbouring

Storytellers' Foundation

communities, a fair and just place to live. We hope this case study might help us find government allies willing to work alongside us."

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More information on the Hazelton area, resources and activities as well as contact information for the Storytellers' Foundation can be found at: <http://www.upperskeena.ca/>

Resources

Anne Docherty & Doug Donaldson, Storytellers' Foundation. "Action 2000: A journey into the human and economic potential of the Upper Skeena" Village of Hazelton: Gitxsan Wet'suwet'en Marketing Corporation, February 1998.

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More Profiles of Effective Practice and other resources on social inclusion are available at: <http://www.ccednet-rcdec.ca/en/pages/learningnetwork.asp>

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