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Learning circles:

What is their potential in Aboriginal community economic development?

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Learning circles: what is their potential in Aboriginal community economic development?

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This publication is dedicated to John McBride
– community organizer and social enterprise businessperson –

1943-2010

A tireless champion of Aboriginal community development

Preface

… through the mists of time legend tells us that John McBride was born in an isolated cabin in the woods in 1943. His mother was alone at the time, as his father was out working his trap line and was already two weeks late returning. The family cabin was small, the firewood supply had run out, and food was scarce. John's mother, realizing that they could not stay any longer, bundled two-day-old John into blankets and wraps, strapped on her snow shoes, and started out to get them both to safety. After two days of trekking through the deep snow, John's mother could go no further and collapsed, hugging John and protecting him as much as possible from the sub-zero temperatures.

Just when it seemed like it was over, a roving band of gypsies appeared; they loaded both John and his mother onto their sleigh and took them to their camp. It took John's mother a week to recover, and when she did, John was nowhere to be found. She never saw him again.

John was raised by the gypsies until he was just over two years old, when he was left unattended for a few hours and he managed to wander off into the bush. When they went looking for him, all they could find were his tracks and then a set of wolf tracks. They never saw him again.

John was raised by this wolf pack until he was four years old, when a group of Natives, out hunting for moose, came upon him running wild through the bush. They took him back to their village and he was raised by them until he was eight. At that time, the tribe realized that John needed to be educated in the ways of his own people, so they brought him into town.

John soon relocated to North Vancouver, and the rest is history ...

Okay, most of you by now may have realized that this is not really the story of John McBride, the man, but it is likely part of the story of the soul that made the man who he was. John was what is referred to as an "old soul", and this is what made him very unique and allowed him to leave behind the legacy that he did.

John, the man, passed away on October 25, 2010, very suddenly of complications related to late-stage pancreatic cancer and this cut short a lifetime of community service that leaves behind an enduring legacy, including this publication released almost five years after his passing.

He was an inspired teacher at Lord Byng and Templeton high schools, the Native Education Centre, BCIT/VCC Hospitality Management, and the SFU Centre for Sustainable Community Development. He published curriculum on international development, urban studies, and prejudice and discrimination; and, he was a pioneer in use of simulation in education. He participated in the conscious exploration of 'intentional community' in the 1970s and 80s with Community Alternatives Co-op Housing and Fraser Common Farm, and co-founded and co-managed Isadora's Co-op Restaurant on Granville Island, Vancouver, BC.

He treasured his opportunity to come alongside First Nations communities during the last 20 years, working in adult education in community economic development and management, as well as the cultural context of supporting entrepreneurs. He had a fierce commitment to local democracy and played a delegate role over many years for False Creek Housing Co-op in the False Creek South Neighbourhood Association, demonstrating the capacity to deliberate, plan, and make a positive impact on the liveability of neighbourhoods.

In his personal life, John was a passionate player of sports, games, and cards, encouraging friends always to take time for the joy of play. He enjoyed immensely his poker pals of 30 years, his competitive croquet partners and friends of 25 years, and singing with friends in community and gospel choirs in his last seven years. He was a great cook and placed much importance on routinely celebrating over a meal. Mountain hiking, white-water canoeing, ocean kayaking, and travelling were also great pleasures of his – all the better when done with friends.

I had the pleasure of working with John, becoming a friend of his (and then a friend of his friends), and acknowledge that it was an amazing, yet all too short, journey of exploration for me. John was an incredibly patient mentor; every moment that I knew him, he was teaching.

He lived his life to teach; in fact, even in dying, John taught. He taught us not only how to accept death, but how to embrace it.

Here is a short description of John, in the words of his good friend, Vancouver City Councillor Geoff Meggs:

> "*John used his cancer diagnosis as an opportunity to examine the questions of what lives on and what passes away. He was grateful for a wonderful life and appreciative of the amazing mystery of its beauty and impermanence.*"

After reviewing this publication while still in draft form, John's wife Val wrote the following email back to me:

> "*Just read the paper – wow, so nice to read such a thoughtful overview of the work John so enjoyed! Thank you, thank you*."

And in a follow-up email to some of John's closest associates whom she wanted to make aware of the publication, Val made the following statement:

> "*Hi all – forwarding this note from Ray Gerow, John's wonderful CED partner ... John was the methodology lead and was very delighted to be doing the start up of the various Learning Circles described in the paper. He loved the team, and Greg Halseth was a wonderful supportive project leader.*
>
> *Many of you are involved in education or community development /engagement in various forms and communities. The paper provides a great review of the strengths of Learning Circles in a variety of settings and with diverse groups – they were used in Sweden for adult education for example! Thought you might find it a resource for your work also*. *Lots of love – Val*"

John, on behalf of the Aboriginal community that you were so passionate about, we thank you, and we honour your family for sharing you with us.

Ray Gerow
January 2015

Learning circles: what is their potential in Aboriginal community economic development?

ABSTRACT

This paper explores learning circles and their potential as community economic development (CED) tools. Special emphasis is placed on learning circles as an Aboriginal methodology and the opportunities of using this as an appropriate approach in Aboriginal contexts. Drawing upon the experiences of the Urban Aboriginal Economic Development (UAED) Network and its learning circles, a content analysis is used to examine the lessons and challenges in the wider context of learning circle methodologies, knowledge mobilization theory, and a CED framework. Through a literature review and an account of the UAED experience, the paper introduces the learning circle concept. A brief review of CED principles and processes, and the knowledge mobilization literature, provides the backdrop for placing learning circles in existing concepts. In conclusion, the authors elaborate on the value of the learning circle methodology in terms of its potential to respond to knowledge mobilization expectations and challenges in the realization of Aboriginal CED.

KEYWORDS

learning circles, Aboriginal methodology, community economic development

Learning circles: what is their potential in Aboriginal community economic development?

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores learning circles (LC) and their potential as community economic development (CED) tools. Knowledge mobilization literature identifies numerous forms of information exchange and learning while stressing the importance of multidirectional communication and stakeholder involvement (Lévesque 2009; Ward *et al*. 2009). Interaction shortcomings and unmet capacity needs are identified as very real barriers to knowledge mobilization (Cooper and Levin 2010). This paper places LC at that point of knowledge mobilization needs and aspirations with the goal to examine LC applicability in Aboriginal CED contexts and to identify the LC potential to enhance knowledge mobilization. Aboriginal scholars and LC literature emphasize the need for openness to Aboriginal approaches and values in research and CED. As a method rooted in Aboriginal practice and tradition, LC hold promise to bridge the gap between academic and policy approaches on the one hand, and Aboriginal worldviews on the other. In this context, the authors share the experiences of the Urban Aboriginal Economic Development (UAED) Network and its LC, and examine lessons and challenges in the wider context of LC methodologies and knowledge mobilization theory.

A brief introduction to CED principles, processes, and challenges based on existing literature establishes the context. Drawing upon previous literature, the paper introduces the LC concept. While all LC are unique in their exact methodology and purpose, there are common features in terms of facilitation, application, defining principles, and outcomes. By introducing a breadth of LC represented in the literature, we aim to contribute to an understanding of possible LC

applications as well as the common features that support LC. Following this, a brief review of knowledge mobilization literature presents the backdrop for placing LC into existing concepts. LC share many elements with the various forms of knowledge mobilization. They appear to be situated, not only at the end of the knowledge mobilization scale where maximum interaction and communication is positioned, but they seem to go beyond that by increasing multidirectional interaction and the co-creation of knowledge, and in fostering an internalization of new understandings. The paper then elaborates on the UAED experience with LC, placing the UAED lessons and challenges of urban Aboriginal economic development LC within the findings derived from the literature.

DEFINITIONS AND CHALLENGES IN COMMUNITY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Before exploring LC and knowledge mobilization, we will elaborate briefly on the definition of CED in order to provide a reference framework for the context of our LC examination. As Lo and Halseth (2009 p.80) point out, “CED […] is complex in both theory and practice”. Therefore, we will only outline some basic principles, processes, and prerequisites here. Markey *et al*. (2005 p.2) characterize “locally based efforts [to diversify local economies and become more viable and more resilient to change] as community economic development”. Among the central conditions for CED, they emphasize organizational flexibility to enable a community to respond to economic opportunities and governance demands. The guiding principles for successful CED include community-based approaches, meaningful local participation, sustainable development, asset-based development, self-reliance, a commitment to capacity building, entrepreneurialism, and empowerment (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993; Pierce and Dale 1999).

Moreover, Shaffer *et al.* (2006) stress the importance of an interdisciplinary approach that integrates economic and non-economic community development factors. This is a concept that supports the central role of social infrastructure, which is "measured by the existence of active civic organizations, local businesses that support local community projects, community-wide fund-raising capacity, and extra-local linkages to nearby communities, state, and national agencies" (Crowe 2006 p.573). Similarly, the concept of social capital, as defined for example by Putnam (2000) and Reimer *et al.* (2008), describes some of the underlying dynamics and prerequisites for CED principles. Social capital is understood as social networks. These are guided by rules allowing for reciprocal and trusting relationships, which can be tapped into as assets in CED. Also of relevance to our examination of LC potential in CED contexts are some of the processes of CED, including initiation of the process, data collection and analysis, planning, implementation, and monitoring and revision (Markey *et al*. 2005).

Success factors that have become evident in case studies of Aboriginal CED not only confirm the validity of general CED principles in Aboriginal contexts but also add leadership, effective governance, and value-led decision-making as crucial components (Loxley 2002; Orr *et al*. 2011; Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development http://hpaied.org/). Sought-after CED benefits in Aboriginal communities include "increased employment, financial gains, infrastructure creation, [and] cultural revitalization" (Bennett *et al*. 2012 p.752). Table 1 summarizes the principles and processes of CED introduced here.

Table 1 – Community Economic Development

Principles	Additional Aboriginal Principles	Processes
Capacity Building Local Participation Partnership Empowerment Entrepreneurialism Asset-Based Development Self-Reliance Sustainability	Leadership Effective Governance Value-Led Decisions	Process Initiation Data Collection and Analysis Planning Implementation Monitoring and Revision

While the principles outline ideal conditions for success, there are, in reality, some common challenges to CED, including the social, political, and economic climate in which it takes place (Craig *et al*. 2000). Dependence on the market, a lack of genuine community involvement, and dependence on outside funding are just some of these challenges. For Aboriginal communities in particular, not only the lack of control, but also government policy hurdles, and barriers due to the discrimination of traditionally marginalized groups often limit CED success (Loxley 2002; Lo and Halseth 2009). Herbert-Cheshire (2000 p.203) notes that, in many cases of local empowerment for community development, "it is not so much control as the added burden of responsibility that is being devolved to local people", thereby alluding to capacity challenges in communities. In our examination of LC, we will focus on how their knowledge mobilization potential reflects CED principles, fosters the realization of CED processes, and responds to the challenges identified above.

THE LEARNING CIRCLE CONCEPT

There are a number of terms referring to the LC format, including Learning Circle, Study Circle, Listening Circle, Knowledge Circle, Sharing Circle, and Wisdom Circle (see for example Charter 1996; Martin and De Pisón 2005; Bessarab *et al.* 2009). These terms also express some of the basic characteristics most LC have in common. Listening is a highly valued quality that creates the foundation for respect and acceptance among participants, and enables reciprocal learning, sharing of knowledge and wisdom, and collective problem solving. The 'circle' concept, at its most basic implies an equality of participation and a lack of hierarchy.

Literature shows that there are numerous forms of LC in different settings and with varying purposes. Generally, a LC is a group of people who come together to engage in dialogue about a common interest (Bonner Curriculum n.d.). Examples range from small groups of less than ten participants to large gatherings of up to eighty individuals (Hagan 2005; Lavallée 2009). LC have been placed within existing methodological and theoretical frameworks. Hiebert (1996), for example, finds the origins of the LC in cooperative learning theory[1]. Bazylak (2002 p.136) describes them as a "form of focus group" and as a discursive narrative method. MacIntosh (2005), on the other hand, places LC within personal experience methods[2], while Rothe *et al.* (2009) consider it a novel approach to interviewing based on Aboriginal traditions; and Maar *et*

[1] Johnson *et al.* (n.d. p.6) define cooperative learning as "individuals [working] together to maximize their own and each other's learning".
[2] Clandinin and Connelly's (1994) concept of personal experience methods refers to lived experience, how it can be communicated by the person who has experienced it, and how it can be studied by another party.

al. (2010) describe it as participatory action research[3]. Wade and Hammick (1999) make a connection between LC and experiential learning[4]. Besides research methodologies and learning theories, there is also literature that places LC in a wider context of interaction and conversation, for example as a "collaborative conversation model" (Baldwin and Linnea 2010 ch.1). Morgan's (2005) idea of systems thinking[5] also has a number of attributes in common with Aboriginal methodology, including a focus on exploring real life, understanding the effects of interaction, and a shift away from attention to objective knowledge towards context and relationships.

What makes LC unique?

When attempting to place LC within the range of commonly referred to methodologies, it should be noted that some of the central characteristics of LC differ from Eurocentric learning, interview, and focus group formats in terms of levels of participation and interaction. The most evident divergence, noted above, is the equality and empowerment of all participants without

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[3] "When [participatory action research] is used correctly, the community is involved in the conception of the project as stakeholders who define the research question, participate in planning and designing the project, and are involved in implementation and evaluation" (Jacklin and Kinoshameg 2008 p.55).

[4] According to Burnard (1988 p.127), experiential learning "[emphasizes] subjective experience, freedom of choice and the centrality of individual meaning". Sutherland and Henning (2009) underline the importance of interconnectedness in experiential learning. Summarizing six propositions common to a number of prominent 20th century scholars of experiential learning theory, Kolb and Kolb (2005 p.194) define experiential learning as process- rather than outcome-focused. It draws out the learners' beliefs. As a "holistic process of adaptation to the world [experiential learning] results from synergetic transactions between the person and the environment" and is a process of creating knowledge. Ryser *et al*. (2009 p.251) further describe experiential learning as a "social process whereby learning occurs through participation in the social practice of the community". In communities of practice, such as LCs, experiential learning can be nurtured through routine interaction whereby stakeholders have an opportunity to connect to a wider pool of ideas, experiences, advice, and support. Community development practitioners can benefit from the transfer of tacit knowledge, skills, and protocols that are not easily learned.

[5] Systems thinking, according to Morgan (2005 p.4) is a "way of mentally framing the world" that is primarily concerned with the 'whole' and only secondarily with the constituent elements. Seeing the world from a systems thinking perspective means to see it with "a mindset attuned to processes, patterns, and [integrated] relationships" (Haines 1998 p.1). The underlying principles for the systems thinking mindset, according to Haines, are openness, interrelationship, and interdependence.

hierarchies or experts; everyone in a LC is a learner (MacIntosh 2005; Goodkind 2006). A common method or tool, although not mentioned or applied in all cases, is the use of a talking stick or equally respectful object to ensure the equality of all participants and to give a voice to everyone (Co-Intelligence Institute n.d.). As a means of creating a situation of trust and openness, it is often stressed that participants must 'speak from the heart', 'speak honestly', or engage in 'truth-telling' (Garfield *et al.* 1998; Patten and Ryan 2001). In eliminating hierarchies and presentation-style teaching, Hiebert (1996) finds that LC support learning based on natural patterns of human interaction. The element of 'exchange', noted by Easterling (2008) for example, further underlines the relationship between participants and the multiple directions and processes of knowledge transfer that happen within LC. We will argue later in in this paper that the relationships and resulting knowledge mobilization processes go beyond one- or two-way knowledge exchange, making LC a unique tool for knowledge creation and internalization.

Some facilitation guidelines are shared in the LC literature. The facilitator does not occupy a leading position. Rather, a facilitator is responsible for organizational aspects such as planning, inviting participants, preparing the informal setting, ensuring that the values of the LC are respected and maintained, and steering the LC toward its particular goal (Erklenz-Watts *et al.* 2006). Bjerkaker (2003) situates the role of the facilitator somewhere between that of a chair person and a secretary. Facilitators commonly identify a loosely defined focus or purpose for the LC before calling and planning it; however, depending on the context of the LC, participants may determine the exact objectives and expectations in a common effort (Lovett and Gilmore 2003).

Authors encourage LC participants to take turns in facilitating sessions to emphasize their non-hierarchical relationship, while another example also shows that having one or two constant facilitators provides their LC with structural consistency that allows all participants to direct their focus to the goals and objectives of their group (Lynd-Balta *et al.* 2006). Part of facilitation can be the preparation of open-ended questions or structured activities as vehicles for conversation (Berry 1999). In other instances, LC specifically avoid any formal agenda (Noble and Henderson 2008). Informal environments are believed to be conducive to a supportive atmosphere (Bessarab *et al.* 2009). In order to support an informal and comfortable environment, and in some cases to break the ice, the sharing of food or snacks and beverages is recommended (Lavallée 2009).

Origins

The literature attributes LC to a variety of origins. Baldwin and Linnea (2010) trace the circle as a form of gathering and interacting back to early human organization. The most commonly mentioned roots of LC lie in Aboriginal practices, including Native American councils' sacred Indigenous practices, First Nations' sharing circles, the traditional talking circle, or Celtic and Native American traditions in general (see for example Co-Intelligence Institute n.d.; Garfield *et al.* 1998). Lovett and Gilmore (2003 p.195), on the other hand, relate that the concept was "originally developed for American industries of the 1960s but was then adapted and later applied to educational settings", and the Australian Nursing Journal (2006) also introduces an adaptation of a concept that was reportedly developed in the manufacturing industry of the 1970s. The Swedish study circle, a phenomenon in Scandinavian adult education, can be traced

back to the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, when its founder Oscar Olson first officially introduced it in 1902 (Moir and Azaroff 2007; Larsson and Nordvall 2010; Åkerström and Brunnberg 2013).

Aboriginal circle methodology

Since traditional Aboriginal methodology is often mentioned as the origin of the LC, and because the experience of the UAED introduced later in this article revolves around the concept of LC as an application of Aboriginal protocol in contemporary contexts, we summarize some of the commonly mentioned elements of traditional Aboriginal circle methods in Table 2. While each Aboriginal group or nation has its own traditions, there are commonalities in both protocol and underlying values. The circle form itself, both in terms of participants sitting in a circle and in terms of a graphic representation of holistic interconnectedness, is common in traditional Aboriginal approaches. Rothe *et al*. (2009), for example, identify sharing circles as a traditional Aboriginal communication tool used for problem solving, creating balance in the community, and promoting community health. It is often emphasized that Elders play a central role as knowledge holders and teachers. Ceremony and symbolic objects set the stage for non-threatening, non-confrontational, and respectful interaction in the circle where everyone gets a voice (Granillo *et al*. 2010). Essential values guiding Aboriginal protocol in the circle approach, according to Rothe *et al*. (2009) and Graveline (2000), include circular, flowing, integrative, mental, spiritual, emotional, physical, reflective, respectful, healing, and egalitarian. Similarities of LC to Aboriginal methodology are clear and suggest the successful application of LC at the interface of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal contexts. Graveline (2000 p.361) makes important

observations about the necessity of using Aboriginal approaches in order to create a collective contemporary context, reclaim the curriculum, and avoid fractured information.

Table 2 – Traditional Aboriginal Protocol for LC

Every person is a holder of valuable knowledge.

The traditional roles of Aboriginal sharing or wisdom circles include:

Communication tool,
Problem solving through consensus,
Sharing of resources to sustain dialogue,
Creation of balance and support among participants, and
Promotion of community and individual health.

Common elements of traditional Aboriginal protocol include:

Elders are crucial in their role as knowledge holders and teachers,
Participants sit in a circle,
Ceremonial aspects underscore respect for, and embrace of, knowledge, e.g. through song, dance, story-telling, or opening/closing rituals,
Everyone gets a voice, often ensured through the use of a talking stick/object, and
Medicine wheel serves as a holistic model of relationships and interdependencies.

Attributes of traditional Aboriginal protocol include:

Circular and flowing,
Integrative and respectful,
Egalitarian and supportive,
Non-threatening and non-confrontational,
Mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical, and
Reflective and healing.

Expressed purposes and contexts of Aboriginal protocol today include:

Learning as a life-long process,
Learning through observation,
Creation of a collective context,
Reclamation of the curriculum, and
Avoidance of fractured information.

Sources: Graveline 2000; Córdoba 2005; Rothe 2009; Lavallée 2009; Granillo *et al*. 2010.

The following sections focus on the application of LC and introduce audiences, contexts, and outcomes as summarized in Figure 1. The circular shape of Figure 1 underlines the multitude of participant situations and their possible results as described in the literature and expresses the open-ended possibilities beyond the examples included in this review. To give an example, LC literature describes a variety of Aboriginal participant groups in education, research, and community development contexts, and the outcomes for those combined include all of the outcomes listed in Figure 1. Rather than describing every combination of audiences, contexts, and their respective outcomes, this review will briefly introduce the audiences, contexts, and outcomes in separate sections.

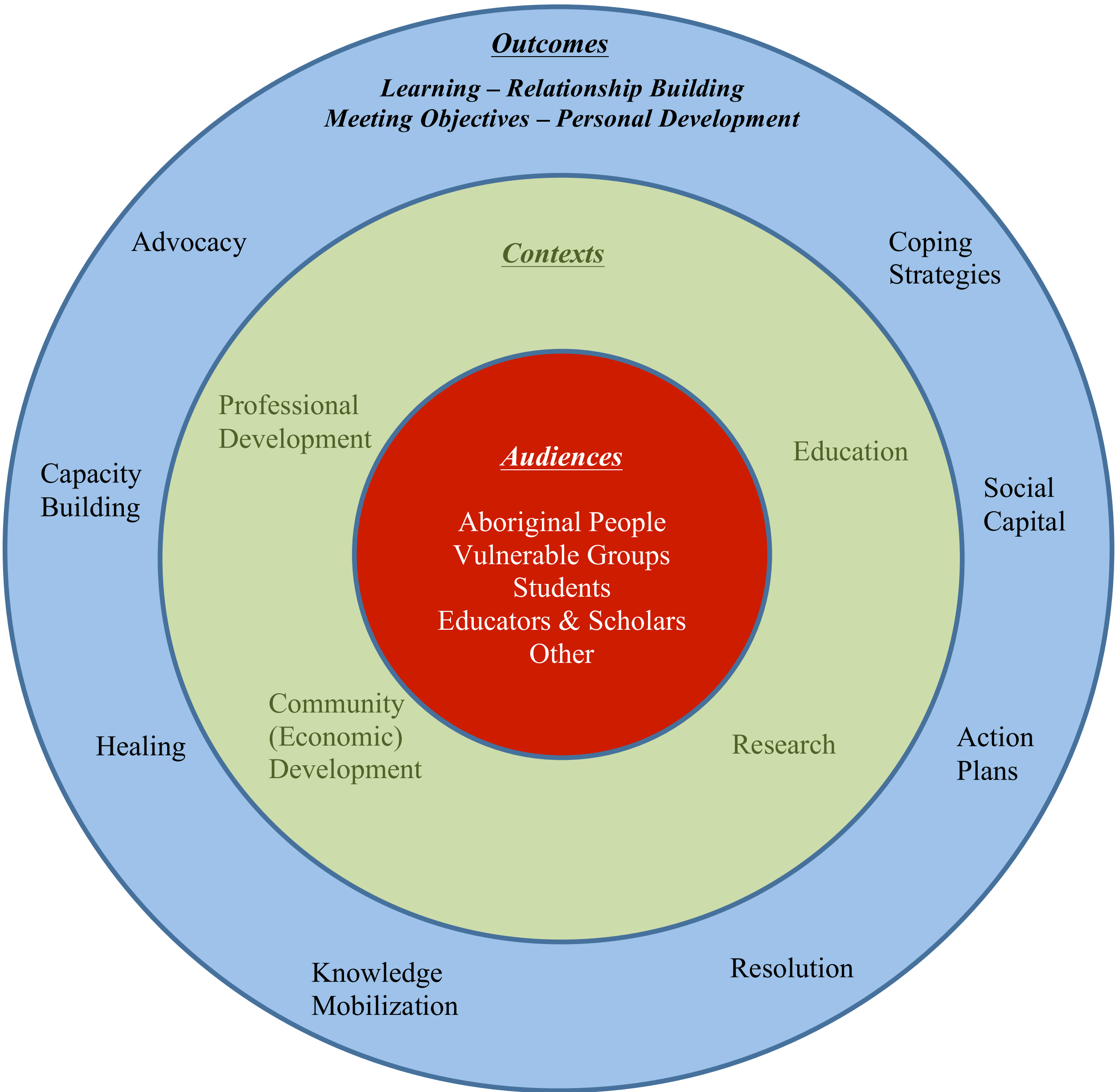

Figure 1 – Learning Circle Audiences, Contexts, and Outcomes

Audiences

The various types of LC represented in the literature involve a number of different audiences, which indicate, on the one hand, the breadth of application possibilities and, on the other hand, the suitability of LC for specific population groups based on particular LC principles.

Aboriginal peoples

As mentioned before, Aboriginal peoples are a well-represented LC audience group in the literature (including for example Patten and Ryan 2001; Palys and Victor 2007; Maar *et al.* 2010). Aboriginal methodology is a way of responding to contemporary challenges faced by Aboriginal people through invoking Aboriginal tradition. Elders express the essential need for Aboriginal people to speak for themselves and be the ones talking about their cultural identity as “White ‘expertism’” does not provide legitimate accounts of Aboriginality (Graveline 2000 p.362). Circle methodology is described as giving Aboriginal people a voice where it has been denied. Familiar, comforting, and culturally appropriate methodology is said to support the achievement of group or individual goals for Aboriginal audiences (Lavallée 2009).

Vulnerable groups

Beyond Aboriginal audiences, LC are recognized as a suitable method in working with vulnerable groups. This is due to core LC principles, such as equality and respect, which afford participants a certain degree of comfort, support, and security. As a setting that provides safety within a small group, LC are described as reducing isolation of participants. Examples in the literature reviewed here include refugees, victims of workplace bullying, people living in low

income situations, and women offenders (Stino and Palmer 1999; Ravensbergen and VanderPlaat 2010).

Students

In a variety of publications, students of different ages and stages in life were identified as participants benefitting from LC in various contexts. They included high school students; adult learners from literacy programs, continuing education, and personal interest programs; and post-secondary students, in particular students who self-identified as at-risk for failure and residents of remote communities (Bazylak 2002; Australian Nursing Journal 2006; Pelech *et al*. 2006; Noble and Henderson 2008). Some vulnerable students were of Aboriginal identity, and LC were chosen as a method of engagement for the reasons outlined above for Aboriginal people and vulnerable groups. In other cases, LC provided a setting for a liberal and democratic learning environment.

Educators and scholars

Other LC participants in the academic realm include scholars and faculty at post-secondary institutions, as well as teachers. Bessarab *et al*. (2009) for example, describe a platform for Aboriginal scholar mentoring. Lynd-Balta *et al*. (2006) and Polirstock *et al*. (2002) provide accounts of self-directed college faculty LC. While Salleh's (2006) example, as well as Lovett and Gilmore's (2003) article, refer to LC as professional development tools for school teachers, their goals and outcomes are very similar to those found among post-secondary faculty LC audiences. Teachers, faculty, and scholars report capacity building through self-directed

knowledge exchange and formation regarding course material, teaching methods, and research approaches.

Community (economic) development agents

Block’s (2008) elaborations on the power of small groups refer to mainstream marketplace and organizational participants. Other authors provide accounts of LC with community foundations, community leadership, and government representatives (Hagan 2005; Easterling 2008). Beyond such specific accounts, there are more general publications which imply the application of LC with civic engagement leaders or general members of the public related to specific contexts (Co-Intelligence Institute n.d.; Garfield *et al*. 1998; Patten and Ryan 2001).

Contexts

The LC application contexts described in the literature cover a wide range of circumstances and purposes. A lot of contexts are specific to certain audiences but, at the same time, there are accounts of similar contexts for various audiences.

Professional development

Professional development LC occur mostly in the realm of education and academia. LC are perceived as alternatives to lectures and one-day workshops as they respond better to concerns regarding lack of power and agency, lack of resources, unmanageable workloads, lack of encouragement, and implementation of innovation (Lynd-Balta *et al*. 2006).

At the University of British Columbia, professional development in health care takes place through something akin to a LC via an online platform for knowledge exchange and discussion (UBC n.d.). By way of video conferencing and an ongoing online conversation, scholars and practitioners exchange information and experience, maintain a dialogue, and build relationships beyond their own programs.

Education

The Swedish study circles are described as a form of liberal adult education, or self-education. The initial intention was to broaden education for the lower middle class, who, at the time of the first study circles, commonly attained little formal education (Bjerkaker 2003; Larsson and Nordvall 2010). From there, they developed into a wide-spread phenomenon in which the general public actively participates. Other examples of LC in adult education tend to cater to the needs of specific audiences, especially those who are considered vulnerable and those whose cultural background and traditional learning methods differ from Eurocentric approaches (Stino and Palmer 1999; Córdoba 2005). In these adult learning contexts, LC are reported to create enhanced access to education for participants.

Furthermore, LC have been tested and applied in post-secondary education contexts. The reasoning varies from enhanced accessibility for certain student groups, to incentives for student participation and networking, and incorporating experiential elements and ‘real life’ connections (Wade and Hammick 1999; Lavan 2008). The University of Calgary has developed a distance education social work program that is built on LC principles. Extending LC to online and

distance learning is aimed at increasing access for remote communities and offering a curriculum that reflects community realities, while at the same time building a community of learners (Zapf *et al.* 2003; Pelech *et al.* 2006).

Other educational contexts for LC refer to specific programs or social aspects of the classroom. Martin and De Pisón (2005), for example, consider the value of LC in religious education to challenge the role of the educator, increase knowledge exchange, and be more inclusive of experience and wisdom. Zachariah and Moreno (2006) describe LC as a classroom tool to build a sense of trust, and a feeling of safety and inclusion among students of all ages.

Research

The value of LC in research comes from their potential to break down barriers between researchers and research participants (Silver *et al.* 2003). The participatory focus of LC, derived from the equality of all participants and giving a voice to everyone, allows for research subject involvement in research design, and analysis and interpretation of data, thereby enhancing the potential for greater research accuracy and the immediate sharing of findings and their implications (Rothe *et al*. 2009).

Various authors describe LC as a culturally appropriate research method with Aboriginal research participants (Berry 1999; Silver *et al*. 2003). Beyond the goal of overcoming power imbalances between the researcher and subject, LC application in Aboriginal research is a manifestation of “[challenging] the boundaries of formal academic research and [re-validating]

traditional Aboriginal research methodologies" as a "reclamation and relocation of Aboriginal space, place and time" (Córdoba 2005 p.1 and 5). In more generalized terms, Maar *et al*. (2010) emphasize the opportunity to develop a research agenda that is inclusive and reflective of all groups who are involved and affected. This responds to the CED challenges of lacking genuine community participation with the potential to allow value-led decision-making by an empowered community.

Community (economic) development

In addition, the literature shows that LC are being used in community development contexts. The key purpose common to all examples appears to be enhanced communication and relationship building between involved groups. Easterling (2008) focuses on the role of LC to build social capital in community development. The author presents social capital as citizen engagement, participation, and contribution in a community and describes LC as a method of initiating and strengthening communication, relationships, and cooperation among players. This shows how LC can be a tool in creating the necessary conditions for successful CED. Hagan's (2005) example of LC in community development, including economic development, underlines the role of LC in fostering collaboration, communication, mutual understanding, and relationship building, particularly in contexts of cultural conflicts or perceived power imbalances.

Examples of further LC applications include communication and knowledge exchange in contexts that are defined by specific goals. In those cases, the sharing of experience and

exchange of knowledge is solution-oriented and facilitates the development of new practices or action plans (Bonner Curriculum n.d.). In the public and policy realm, Ravensbergen and VanderPlaat (2010) introduce LC as a form of enhanced citizen participation in policy development.

Personal development and reconciliation

Another context described in the literature is one of mental and spiritual development and healing. Here, the formation of a LC and the exchanges taking place in the circle aim at self-discovery, integration, healing, and coping with difficulties (Goodkind 2006; Baldwin and Linnea 2010).

Patten and Ryan (2001) elaborate on the value of LC as a tool for reconciliation. According to the authors, LC are a highly suitable method for intercultural projects, especially those with the goal of resolving conflicts and finding common ground among participants of different cultural backgrounds. In more general terms, LC are a form of conversation and a model of engagement that is open to any context (National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation 2010).

Outcomes and Achievements

The outcomes and achievements described in the LC literature can be grouped into four general areas, including effective learning experiences, meeting objectives, relationship building, and accounts of personal development.

Learning

All contexts introduced above contain elements of knowledge exchange and knowledge formation as experiences and expertise are shared. Some authors choose wordings such as 'deeper learning' or 'deeper understanding' to convey LC participants' learning outcomes (Bonner Curriculum n.d.; Charter 1996). Other learning results include critical thinking, problem solving skills, broadened perspectives, and improved information retention (Noble and Henderson 2008). These learning experiences are relevant in CED contexts as they constitute knowledge internalization in terms of the profound understanding of other stakeholders' circumstances, and of the effects that this can have on other stakeholders' capacity building.

Relationship building

A common element in most LC accounts is a description of positive and supportive group dynamics based on the ability to create trust and a safe space that can lead to community-building and group cohesion (Pelech *et al*. 2006; Zachariah and Moreno 2006). Block's (2008) concept of citizenship as a community-building form of accountability and empowerment indicates the importance of community. Easterling (2008) points out the potential for building social capital in the exchange of ideas and the sharing of information. The creation of a community of practice[6] strengthens the network that is initiated in the circle by "[supporting] one another [and] intentionally [creating] new knowledge for their field of practice" (Wheatly and Frieze 2006 par.14; Noble and Henderson 2008). This relates to the CED principles of capacity building and partnership.

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[6] Wenger (1998 p.45) defines communities of practice as a "kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise".

In some instances, participants convey subjective relationship building in terms of bonding, creating a strong sense of collegiality, breaking down isolation, and developing a collaborative spirit (Stino and Palmer 1999; Polirstok *et al.* 2002). More measurable relationship building outcomes include sustained conversation and dialogue among participants, and collectively finding or creating solutions (Goodkind 2006). Hagan (2005) reports that the LC approach can lead to sustainable relationship-building between communities and governments. This was manifested in improved collaboration and renewed common interest that led to increased community capacity and empowerment.

Meeting objectives

LC are also shown to be effective in meeting objectives. The above described relationship building and group cohesion among participants, for example, can lead to strengthened collective action and advocacy (Ravensbergen and VanderPlaat 2010). The National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation (2010) maintains that LC adapted to certain situations and group settings are proven to be effective tools in the resolution of a variety of issues and general achievements, including exploration, conflict transformation, decision-making, and collaborative action. Turning the focus back on CED, examples show that LC can create circumstances that are conducive to successful CED initiatives. Aiming at community-government partnerships, Hagan's (2005) example of LC demonstrate the potential to build relationships that are supportive of CED principles and processes. Outcomes such as increased community capacity in service delivery, planning, and decision-making, strongly imply the relevance and suitability of LC in the CED context. Other accounts of met LC objectives confirm

capacity building, increased capability, putting learnings into practice, transforming knowledge into real-life experience, developing a vision for change, and completing a number of activities (Wade and Hammick 1999; Martin and De Pisón 2005).

Personal development

The last group of outcomes refers to accounts of personal development and growth, especially with vulnerable or young participants. Bazylak (2002 p.135) describes the process of building collective strength among the female high school students of his study:

> Individually the voices were but a whisper in the wind. As a collective the voices offered support and strength for each other. The strength of the collective increased into a whirlwind where the girls were able to share their stories and experiences safely with the others in the group.

LC methodology is reported to lead to an increased sense of agency and a sense of belonging for participants with similar backgrounds. Especially for Aboriginal participants and those with a common history of being victimized, LC facilitate a healing process by reducing isolation and responding to pain in a holistic manner by creating a space that enables people to release pain and engage in a network of mutual support within the group (Charter 1996; Berry 1999; Silver *et al.* 2003; MacIntosh 2005).

Challenges

While literature in general reports LC as a success, there are some accounts of challenges relating to financial sustainability, human resources, and concerns with the format. The

financial feasibility of LC has been influenced by the availability of funding sources, such as capacity building grants, public subsidies, and funding from study associations (Hiebert 1996; Larsson and Nordvall 2010). A number of authors mention not only the high cost but also the considerable capacity needs in order to foster continuity and consistency in LC. Preparation, facilitation, and substantial time commitment are noted as limiting factors (Erklenz-Watts *et al.* 2006; Salleh 2006). While LC may function well when brought together, someone and some organization needs to play the role of convener or organizer. In today's increasingly hectic world, managing processes such as LC 'off the side of your desk' is not sustainable.

In terms of format concerns, three issues related to deviations have been observed, including LC turning into a school class teaching situation, LC participants getting lost in conversation that is not related to the LC goals, and LC developing into therapeutic sessions focusing on individual mental or social problems (Bjerkaker 2003). This may indicate that the informal setting of a LC, which is largely considered a strength, may also pose challenges in terms of effectiveness and focus.

KNOWLEDGE MOBILIZATION

In examining the value of LC as a CED tool, it is helpful to briefly review the current literature on knowledge mobilization. Lévesque (2009 p.19) defines knowledge mobilization, as moving mere knowledge exchange into "active processes of creating linkages and exchanges between producers and users of data, information, and knowledge to produce value-added outputs". The concept of internalization, "the conversion of externalized knowledge into tacit knowledge

on an individual or organizational scale [and] the embodiment of explicit knowledge into actions, practices, processes, and strategic initiatives" (Wiggin *et al.* 2002 p.7), adds further depth to the knowledge mobilization concept. Stakeholder involvement and interaction, including problem identification and communication, knowledge development, context analysis, knowledge transfer activities, and knowledge utilization, is another central aspect of knowledge mobilization (The Canadian Institutes of Health Research 2004; Ward *et al.* 2009). Multiple stakeholder involvement in knowledge mobilization is considered paramount because "research findings are more likely to be translated into policy if researchers, policy analysts, managers and politicians negotiate the language and the frame of reference before the research is undertaken" (Davis and Howden-Chapman 1996 p.871; see also Graham *et al.* 2006).

In this paper, LC are examined as to their potential as knowledge mobilization strategies. Some of the existing strategies addressed in the literature include knowledge brokering, bridging organizations, and infrastructure in general. The knowledge broker is a mediator between researchers and end users, enabling two-way interaction and relationships to build mutual understanding, promote knowledge, and inform decision-making (Dobbins *et al.* 2009; Cooper 2010). Processes that are included in knowledge brokering are, for example, concerned with needs assessments, knowledge management, communication of knowledge, networking, capacity development, and organizational change. Identifying some challenges, the authors find that "knowledge brokering […] takes longer to develop collaborative, trusting relationships; [and that] much more capacity development was necessary than anticipated" (Dobbins *et al.*

2009 p.6). Other strategies similarly focus on being inclusive and enabling communication. In concrete terms, this means a focus on end user needs and strategic networking, involving bridging organizations that provide a forum for relevant interaction, the combination of different kinds of knowledge, and more generally creating infrastructure that promotes greater awareness (Belkhodja and Landry 2007; German *et al.* 2008; Berkes 2009).

However, the literature also notes knowledge mobilization barriers. Researcher perceptions and expertise with regards to the realities of stakeholders and end users may be limited. Closely related to this issue, mistrust, competing interests, and communication weaknesses can further reinforce barriers (Cooper and Levin 2010). A strong need for capacity, encompassing leadership, infrastructure, funding, improved communication facilities, and networking abilities pose further challenges to knowledge mobilization (Mitton *et al.* 2007; Qi and Levin 2011).

Finally, there is also literature concerned with the specific characteristics and challenges of Aboriginal knowledge mobilization. Describing one of the challenges for collaboration between academia and Aboriginal end users, Lafrenière *et al.* (2005 p.62) mention that "the university setting is not always a welcoming or safe environment to share aspects of one's life or culture". The divide between researchers and Aboriginal stakeholders goes back to compatibility challenges between western and Aboriginal knowledge and knowledge generation. The challenge of effective knowledge mobilization in this context is to build bridges, communicate and disseminate knowledge more effectively, and adapt curricula and training to Aboriginal contexts (Smylie *et al.* 2003; Lévesque 2009).

THE UAED EXPERIENCE

To explore the potential of LC in CED, this section will introduce the National Network for Urban Aboriginal Economic Development (UAED) and the context and audience of its LC. Following this, we will share some lessons learned, including outcomes and challenges.

UAED Context and Audiences

In response to the growing percentage of Aboriginal people living in Canadian cities and, at the same time, a lack of national resources or networks to share and exchange knowledge about urban Aboriginal matters, the UAED was formed in 2008 under academic-practitioner co-leadership. Designed for a three-year operating period and funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRCC) and the Office of the Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, the initiative was to develop an open and inclusive multi-stakeholder national network of scholars, practitioners, and policy analysts working with urban Aboriginal communities and organizations; universities; federal, provincial, and municipal governments; private industry; and NGOs. The UAED chose LC as its method for creating this network. Similar to some of the literature examples introduced above, the UAED LC format was informed by traditional Aboriginal protocol and aimed to include underlying values and principles that would acknowledge the significance of Aboriginal methodology, create a safe space for meaningful Aboriginal involvement, and allow for a balanced conversation. Elders and prayers were included whenever possible. The goal was to facilitate processes that were inclusive of all stakeholders involved in relevant knowledge creation, exchange, and dissemination.

With a funded operating period of three years and a growing number of LC over that time period and beyond, UAED LC had a stronger long-term focus and higher overall participant numbers than most of the examples from the literature. As outlined in Table 3, the UAED conducted two “LC on LC” to build capacity for the establishment of various LC across Canada. Three topical LC and five regional LC followed the initial development of the UAED LC format. An additional four were in their beginning phases as the UAED operating period came to a close, and further topical project LC on Aboriginal Women and Social Enterprise and on Small Town Governance began their work in five different locations. Participation details have been recorded for a total of thirteen UAED LC. In terms of size, these LC ranged from four to twenty-three participants with an average of twelve. Sixty percent of all participants were practitioners, while 27.5 percent were academics, and 12.5 percent policy representatives. These numbers indicate the great interest in, and need for, active involvement in opportunities for capacity building, relationship building, and exchange of information and experiences among practitioners in the communities.

Table 3 – UAED Learning Circle Timeline, 2008-2012

Type of Learning Circle	Timeline	UAED Learning Circles
Capacity Building for LC	March and November 2009	Learning Circle on Learning Circles in Ottawa and Vancouver: One-time events to build LC capacity and facilitate initial networking
Topical LC	Beginning 2010	Academic Advisory Circle, National Network Advisory Circle, and Practitioners Circle on Governance: One-time events to build capacity and facilitate networking and knowledge exchange
Regional LC	Beginning 2010	Regina, SK, Sault Ste. Marie, ON, Vancouver, BC, Victoria, BC and Winnipeg, MB: Established for the duration of the UAED and possibly beyond
Regional LC	Beginning 2011	Edmonton, AB, Halifax, NS, Saskatoon, SK, and Toronto, ON: In the beginning stages; to be further developed beyond the UAED
Regional LC	Beginning 2011	Prince George, BC and Masset, BC: In the planning stages
Topical LC	Under development in 2011	Support for Aboriginal Women and Social Enterprise Project Learning Circles in Edmonton, AB, Fort St. John, BC Masset, BC, Prince George, BC, and Prince Rupert, BC: In the beginning stages; to be further developed beyond the UAED

Source: UAED 2011.

While one of the goals was to build and strengthen organizational capacity in the communities, participants were asked to limit their organizational representation roles since that could bring conflicts of interest and introduce competitive elements. As advised in some of the LC literature, facilitators were chosen according to their trust relationship with the local community and the necessary experience and capacity to coordinate LC meetings. The UAED provided a platform for increasing the networking by reporting back and sharing between LC. Future plans for UAED LC include continued operation of the established and emerging LC past the funded operating period of the UAED. This article, however, focuses on the lessons that have been extracted from UAED LC and their implications for the value of LC as Aboriginal CED tools.

UAED Outcomes

The numerous LC established and facilitated within the UAED Network and the achieved level of interaction between scholars, practitioners, and policy analysts have provided the UAED and LC participants with valuable lessons and experiences. The results, challenges, and opportunities of LC as a tool for interaction and for knowledge sharing, dissemination, knowledge co-creation, and internalization in CED are presented below.

Knowledge mobilization

Participants talked about several factors that influenced the success of effective knowledge exchange and internalization. The culturally appropriate approach sent a powerful message by demonstrating a way of acknowledging the value in Aboriginal methodology and creating an

Aboriginal starting point for the attempt to improve urban Aboriginal living conditions. Thereby, it also inspired a further search for solutions in traditional models.

Other success factors included the diversity of perspectives, on-the-ground experiences, and accumulated knowledge among participants that made for a rewarding learning experience, proved to be a great source of information, and created capacity and understanding beyond the immediate exchange of information. Equality and honesty inherent in the LC approach enabled participants to internalize new understandings about Aboriginal communities and the roles of policy and research. The diversity of participants contributed to the creative and collaborative generation of ideas based on that common understanding. The relevant stakeholder backgrounds and perspectives were found to foster the development of new ways of looking at things and acceptance for different ways of knowing. Collaborative learning experience generated and disseminated useful knowledge for all parties while creating a new conception of equal partners in a field of common interest and with common goals.

The last success factor was respect. It was incorporated into the methodology, embraced by participants, and promoted as a path to increased awareness of opportunities and common goals. Without putting into practice the principles suggested by the LC format, and dictated by the traditional Aboriginal protocol upon which it was based, LC interaction could not have been as respectful, and consequently productive, in terms of communication and relationship building as it has been.

The UAED experience showed that LC are a practical way to include quiet voices, which may usually be missing in public processes, thereby adding valuable perspectives and experiences to the knowledge creation and mobilization processes. In this context, UAED LC constituted a vehicle, or knowledge mobilization infrastructure, to create direct connection and interaction between the processes of research and policy making, and those who are affected by them but who are not always part of their creation. Practitioners in UAED LC shared first-hand knowledge of policy impacts, opportunities and struggles, needs and aspirations, and community priorities. LC were a way of including these perspectives and adding an important dimension to the planning of research and action.

The UAED had identified a need to improve knowledge access, and participants found that the LC met that need. The examples of concrete outcomes introduced below demonstrate how LC turned out to be an effective knowledge mobilization strategy for the UAED. Expanding the spectrum of meaningful involvement in the future is expected to further broaden the conversation and carry the adoption of new values and approaches to the organizational level. The networking benefits of LC provide an important mechanism for this.

Relationship building

Relationship building as a means of fostering networking and partnerships is a knowledge mobilization strategy as well as an important CED principle. It includes all stakeholders and contributes to the expansion of knowledge sharing, knowledge generation, knowledge internalization, and solution-oriented processes. The UAED experience confirmed the formation

of communities of practice that were inclusive of different stakeholder groups. This enabled participants to experience first-hand the building of common ground from which networks and working relationships can be developed. This experience of 'community' among practitioners furthermore allowed for capacity advantages by aligning efforts and gaining collective strength. As a larger organization connecting the various LC, the UAED demonstrated and further incorporated the importance of networking.

Some UAED LC resulted in new partnerships and working relationships between participants or organizations. The Victoria LC, for example, identified numerous groups in the community that constitute assets to Aboriginal CED, including tourism and art industries, and strong educational programs. At the same time, one of the greatest challenges they found was the isolation of entrepreneurs and active participants in the local Aboriginal economy. LC participants brought more individuals to the table and identified further stakeholders, both groups and individuals, who should be recruited, such as band offices, regional government, lawyers, and accountants. By the end of the UAED operating period, the Victoria LC had drafted a plan for creating a business network, and more specifically an Aboriginal Chamber of Commerce, to provide mentoring, support, and connections. Further LC meetings were scheduled as a first step towards the implementation of that plan. Like the Victoria example, most LC reports indicate that participants are continuously looking to include more organizations and seek more government involvement for added capacity, expertise, communication, and collaboration. This indicates that there are advantages to organizational representation. Even if members of organizations participate as individuals, they contribute connections and access to

organizational capacity that can benefit other participants or commonly identified projects. It also indicates the potential of LC to contribute to organizational change and a higher level networking over time. The increased networking activity on various levels is expected to continue to broaden the conversation in the future. The hope is that participants who internalized their new understandings of Aboriginal CED contexts will introduce and apply these understandings in their respective organizations and find innovative responses to Aboriginal CED challenges, for example in administrative and policy changes.

UAED LC and CED processes

By initiating UAED LC, the first step of the CED process was taken. From there, some UAED LC focused on process-oriented knowledge mobilization in terms of the exchange of ideas and concerns, identification of gaps, and possible areas in need of further attention to respond to data collection and analysis needs. Others took a more result-oriented direction early in their establishment by entering into the planning phase, aiming to arrive at projects and action plans. This demonstrates the flexibility of the approach and indicates the range of opportunities for LC application and customization to local needs and participant preferences in CED.

As models of traditional Aboriginal methodology were applied, UAED LC prompted conversations about traditional approaches in general. The importance of the culturally relevant approach for the success of UAED LC should not be underestimated. As participants gained confidence and internalized the underlying values of the approach, they translated the experience into a model to look towards designing action plans and looking for solutions to

socio-economic needs of urban Aboriginal communities. One of the learnings of a number of UAED LC was acknowledgement of a need to stop participating in program-based approaches to economic development. Program-based funding through one-time and short-term grants and government initiatives does not support long-term planning and capacity building in organizations. Therefore, participants recognized the need to find other approaches that build more independent capacity. Satisfaction with the UAED LC format was an indication that the LC were a first answer to this need by way of creating a process that gave participants independent value in the group, supported capacity building through networking, mobilized important knowledge, and applied and turned to a methodology that was based on Aboriginal principles and practices. While this addressed the independent capacity building challenges, the short-term nature of funding provided through the UAED was recognized as a remaining challenge that will be elaborated on later.

As an example of CED planning, the Vancouver LC composed a strategy focused on social enterprise and the food industry. Their LC conversations had led to the conclusion that program-based economic development only results in project infrastructure, which is tied exclusively to specific, mostly short-term, projects. This does not foster a viable economic infrastructure, including lasting business relationships and communication, transportation, and distribution networks and facilities. The traditional role of food in terms of subsistence, sharing, trade, and health combined with ample opportunity for diverse organizational structures in food businesses and secondary economies promised to be a meaningful sector to focus on. The LC drafted a plan for immediate action to organize gatherings to further connect players in the

regional Aboriginal food industry, encourage research to determine viability of business ideas and models, and examine policy to maximize opportunity.

Capacity building

Capacity building as a principle and prerequisite of CED was identified as a pressing need and high priority in urban Aboriginal economic development. Therefore, it was also one of the explicit goals of UAED LC. Capacity building needs extend to individual and organizational capacity through social capital. At the same time, capacity development and organizational change are identified as challenges in traditional knowledge mobilization strategies, such as the knowledge broker or bridging organizations. LC respond to these needs and challenges. As an effective tool to build trust and relationships, they contribute greatly to building and increasing social capital among stakeholders. In terms of organizing and facilitating LC, organizational support from the UAED was found to be a crucial starting point. While the LC format allows for equality of participants and their knowledge, having organizational initiative in the UAED with expertise and financial support was helpful in creating viable LC. Similarly, organizational support was helpful in some instances to maximize networking and communication and to increase LC influence and their ability to affect change. This shows that it is helpful to have existing capacity and mentorship to build on and expand.

The Regina LC is one example of what capacity building looked like in the UAED LC. It established a capacity development task group to address capacity building needs in the communities and community groups both in terms of networking and training. Their efforts

included a programs and services inventory and plans to become involved in offering training programs for basic skills and to counteract misconceptions about Aboriginal participants in the economy. Beyond creating awareness and a point of contact for networking and support, the LC identified opportunities for collaboration and partnerships with other organizations to maximize capacity building efforts. In doing so, and in building on a deepened understanding of the economic development needs of the urban Aboriginal community, this LC created a plan for a tailored response to the capacity challenges faced by its community on all levels from community members and entrepreneurs, to organizations, and governments.

Challenges

UAED LC reported not only on their activities and successes but also on the challenges they were facing. These included challenges related to the format and the constraints of the participants, as well as sustainability of LC in terms of financial and human capacity.

Format and Participants

As mentioned in the literature review, the informal, open-ended approach with LC can pose some challenges. In the case of the UAED, the format was highly valued but, at times, made it difficult to focus discussions. Practitioner participants were often faced with multiple community challenges in their day-to-day activities. At the organizational level, such challenges included financial and human resource capacity shortages, operational limitations due to program-based funding and reporting mechanisms, and, consequently, limited long-term organizational viability. At the community level, challenges included the many urgent needs of

communities and their members. Such breadth of experiences, multiple community needs, and holistic interdependencies of community issues required participants to focus on particular aspects in order to determine starting points for approaches and action plans. At the same time, these conditions made it difficult to focus LC conversations and narrow them down to where a manageable number of issues were addressed effectively.

Ultimately, while finding and maintaining a narrow, manageable focus was identified as a constant challenge, the UAED LC succeeded in pinpointing starting points for their discussions and strategies. Participants felt that the LC helped create awareness of this challenge and provided much needed strategies to respond to it.

Closely connected to the difficulty of choosing, and staying focused on, individual issues, it was also a challenge for UAED LC participants to look beyond their organizational mandates. While this was an explicit and welcomed rule for creating an open and reciprocal space for conversation, most representatives across all three stakeholder groups work on a daily basis to fulfill their specific organizational mandates and encounter the common knowledge mobilization challenge of competing interests. An environment of program-related funding and strict budgeting needs, whether in research, practice, or policy trains those involved to pursue the advantage of their respective organizations in order to be able to carry out important organizational work. This mode of operation is not easily shed in a process that aims to look for cooperative solutions to issues and challenges faced by those who are ultimately to be served by community work, research, and policy. However, according to the explicit wishes of the

participants, it remained a goal for each LC. Again, by fostering awareness of the challenge and openly addressing it, LC created an opportunity to respond to it.

Sustainability

The UAED LC are more focused on sustainability than most LC examples represented in the literature. The time horizon for enacting urban Aboriginal CED is long. This presents challenges to the short-term evaluation tools and funding so often currently employed. Generally, whether explored in detail or broached in a less specific manner, all UAED LC reports express the importance of, and concern with, sustainability. Throughout the last phase of the UAED funding period, the LC aimed to develop sustainability plans with support from the UAED umbrella organization. This support lent capacity due to the UAED's experience with accessing funding and developing funding mechanisms. This capacity potential can not only build similar capacities on the local level but may also lead to more financial sustainability. It has been noted that for LC to be sustainable they must not be dependent on government program funding. UAED LC discussions clearly indicate that the given limitations of existing sources would limit long-term LC productivity and that there is a need to attach the LC process to other sources of funding.

Individual LC have discussed funding opportunities, and opportunities for continued operation. One possibility identified as worth exploring is to include LC in local or regional Urban Aboriginal Strategy applications. Another example includes partnerships with local community development organizations which have been identified for their potential to bring capacity and

funding. Some LC have actively involved not only practitioners but also funders since the beginning of their operations, thereby expanding the potential for financial and organizational capacity building and sustainability. The financial needs of LC include funding to address research questions that would otherwise block progress in the development of new models. This need could be met with a dedicated fund directed at academics who can undertake projects on behalf of community conveners. At the policy level, targeted, community-directed funds from Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada would add to the sustainability of LC and their community work.

Capacity building and sustainability are closely connected. The UAED has found that its LC experience has demonstrated the necessity to support the capacity of local conveners for long-term sustainability. This capacity would mean having anchoring organizations and individuals to ensure long-term success and, thereby, providing continuity and consistency in LC facilitation to add to sustainability. Suggestions included the exploration of funding opportunities for urban Aboriginal community capacity development. In addition, relationship building with local community organizations and local First Nations constitutes another capacity need on the path to creating sustainable and effective LC. The idea of creating a lobby group out of a LC with the goal of influencing policy making is a manifestation of the LC potential to have sustainable impacts. Other UAED suggestions at the end of its operating period include project funding related to relationship building between stakeholders in Aboriginal CED to synthesize the lessons learned in the LC, thereby contributing to the sustainability and growth of the concept.

These suggestions reiterate the urgent need for financial sustainability in support of effective capacity building and knowledge mobilization in urban Aboriginal communities. There is a need for mechanisms to rapidly deploy small study grants in support of LC work, as well as for mechanisms that support the LC model in urban settings that draw on the UAED experience with financial, human, or organizational capacity.

FINAL THOUGHTS

What does all this mean for the role of LC in Aboriginal CED? After sharing the UAED experience against the backdrop of knowledge mobilization and Aboriginal CED, we would like to share some final thoughts on the potential of the LC approach in this context. Expectations in Aboriginal CED approaches are that they reflect comprehensive knowledge mobilization, foster the realization of sustainable CED processes, and respond to challenges.

Knowledge mobilization in CED should not only be an exchange of knowledge but also the creation and internalization of knowledge that will lead to organizational change and innovative administrative and policy responses to community needs. UAED LC revealed unmet on-the-ground knowledge mobilization needs in communities, including support for urban organizations to facilitate CED, and resources and networks to exchange knowledge and experience. The general lack of effective knowledge mobilization, including internalization of relevant knowledge on individual and organizational levels, was reported to impact all areas of urban Aboriginal life.

LC are designed and experienced to be more inclusive than other knowledge mobilization strategies in their direct involvement of all stakeholders. This not only fosters comprehensive and immediate knowledge exchange but also appears to facilitate relationship and trust building more effectively than the knowledge broker approach and eliminate the need for bridging organizations by directly involving stakeholders. LC thereby respond to the central challenges of other approaches. Reported partnerships and working relationships among UAED LC confirm the effectiveness of LC to broaden networks that can be mobilized to access external resources and expertise and put knowledge into action. Knowledge mobilization barriers mentioned in the literature, including competing interests, mistrust, and communication challenges, some of which were also encountered in UAED LC as described above, are better addressed by LC. Formation of a community of practice among participants, for example, is not mentioned in knowledge mobilization literature and is another aspect LC can contribute. Beyond these advantages to the approach, LC are shown to enable knowledge co-creation. Collaboration in co-generated research projects ensures their applicability and relevance, and is an important step to eliminating the misunderstandings between stakeholders.

Furthermore, UAED LC demonstrated knowledge internalization by individuals, for example in looking towards Aboriginal approaches in their strategic planning. This indicates potential to lead to organizational change over time. UAED LC participants confirmed the relevance and validity of the Aboriginal methodologies incorporated in LC. This, in turn, confirms the further potential of LC to bridge knowledge mobilization gaps where different cultures and ways of knowing intersect. Compatibility challenges and the perceived divide mentioned in the

knowledge mobilization literature are addressed through the LC method as well as the interaction and knowledge exchange and generation it fosters. Therefore, LC can add to and expand on knowledge mobilization in Aboriginal contexts.

What does this mean for Aboriginal CED practitioners, and for Aboriginal communities and their entrepreneurs? The UAED LC have demonstrated their ability to create a new understanding of Aboriginal community realities, values, and goals among all participants. They are a venue for practitioners to access research capacity and influence policy, while policy makers and researchers get an opportunity to understand the effects of their work and to align their efforts with the needs and goals of the community.

For the Aboriginal CED practitioner who is faced with policy barriers, economic challenges, and prejudice, LC provide opportunities to address these issues. The practitioner gets a chance to establish relationships with individuals and organizations in politics, academia, and possibly industry and work closely together with them towards the common goal of building capacity and social capital in the Aboriginal community and supporting Aboriginal entrepreneurs. Deeper understanding of community realities reported in the UAED LC is a first step towards addressing negative perceptions in the community, while relationships with the business community promise improved access to financial institutions, and supplier and buyer networks. Connections with academia provide improved capacity for feasibility studies and needs assessments, based upon which practitioners, policy makers, and entrepreneurs can make informed decisions. These are great advantages for Aboriginal entrepreneurs, for whom the networks and capacity resulting from LC can create a 'one stop shop' for their needs.

Short-term, program-based development has been identified as ineffective in creating sustainable CED in Aboriginal communities. LC offer an alternative that is more effective in creating social capital and promises to effect organizational change rather than focusing on individual programs for a limited amount of time. While the sustainability of LC remains a subject for further exploration, the method is an innovative approach and has potential to produce innovative solutions. As an example of the application of an Aboriginal method in the CED realm, LC are a manifestation of rethinking development strategies in Aboriginal communities.

The UAED LC incorporated the principles of CED both in the underlying principles of the approach and in their activities. We have elaborated on the demonstrated potential of LC to build capacity and partnerships. In addition, LC are a manifestation of local participation and, due to their principles of equal involvement, create a space for empowerment. This is of particular relevance as it responds to the challenge of ensuring genuine community participation in CED and, specifically, enabling Aboriginal communities to take control of their development while addressing capacity challenges. Ideas, discussions, and processes generated in some UAED LC examples indicate potential to support and build entrepreneurialism. Asset-based development will be one of the principles that LC might want to adopt as strategic guidelines, as was done in some UAED LC in the form of creating asset inventories as starting points for their discussions. As self-directed initiatives, LC inherently foster self-reliance; however, self-reliance as a CED principle also has to be incorporated in LC discussions as a

strategic guideline for development processes initiated by, and going beyond, the LC. This is important if LC are to provide a solution to the common CED challenge of dependence on outside funding. In terms of CED processes, the initiation of LC has been a manifestation of the initiation of CED undertakings.

Completed research projects and reports commissioned by the LC demonstrate relevance and potential in the data collection and analysis stage of CED. As mentioned, some LC focused on the planning stage and even entered into implementation by carrying out the first steps of their strategic plans. These were commonly centered on broadening the networking efforts. The ability of LC to facilitate and support full implementation, and the monitoring and revision processes of Aboriginal CED remain to be seen in the future. As for the principles that are particularly important in Aboriginal CED, some have been demonstrated and integrated into LC, while others are possible future results of LC work. The incorporation of Aboriginal perspectives and approaches, for example, created a foundation for value-led decision-making and indicates the high potential for LC as tools in Aboriginal CED. It remains to be examined whether or not this internalization will be carried into the organizational realm beyond the LC, thereby leading to increased strength in governance. UAED LC participants are leaders in their communities and in their particular fields of involvement. The LC focus on supporting further capacity building among the participants and in the communities strengthens leadership. LC, therefore, can play a crucial role in creating favourable conditions for Aboriginal CED.

Sustainability as a principle of CED, and one of the goals for the LC as a method, is an important aspect in determining the value and success of the LC approach. Loxley (2002) notes that CED is more likely to be successful with access to public funding, while dependence on funding was also noted previously as a challenge in CED. Both the sustainability of LC as a method and forum, and the sustainability of CED initiatives born out of LC efforts have to be based on innovative funding mechanisms. From the beginning, the UAED encouraged the continuation of the LC beyond its funding period. Despite the funding and capacity challenges, the LC format is better suited to support continued dialogue than other discussion forums because of its role in building independent networks and relationships. Overlapping principles and challenges in creating sustainable LC and sustainable CED have become evident. This indicates that LC can be integrated very well into the CED process. As an approach that is based on the empowerment of all participants, fosters partnerships and networking, builds capacity, strives for financial sustainability, and supports the internalization of stakeholders' values, LC are not only a method but a valuable part of CED. Action and follow-up by all stakeholders will ultimately decide the long-term effectiveness of LC. The future will show whether the potential for a combination of financial and human capacity building, which promises to address the shortcoming of other approaches, is a sufficient basis for long-term LC sustainability.

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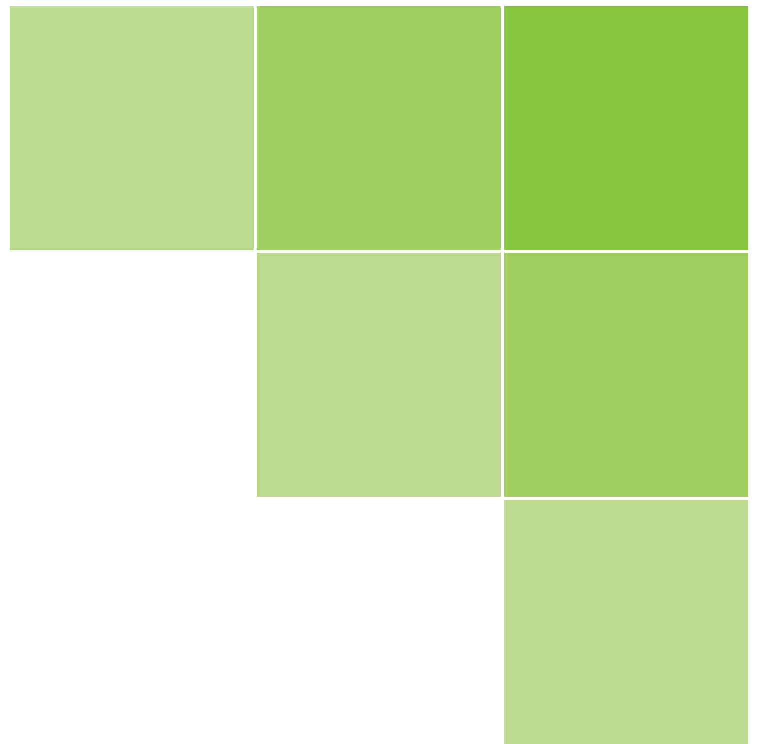

The Community Development Institute at The University of Northern British Columbia

The Community Development Institute (CDI) at UNBC was established in 2004 with a broad mandate in the areas of community, regional, and economic development. Since its inception, the CDI has worked with communities across the northern and central regions of British Columbia to develop and implement strategies for economic diversification and community resilience.

Dedicated to understanding and realizing the potential of BC's non-metropolitan communities in a changing global economy, the CDI works to prepare students and practitioners for leadership roles in community and economic development, and create a body of knowledge, information, and research that will enhance our understanding and our ability to anticipate, and develop strategies for, ongoing transformation. The CDI is committed to working with all communities – Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal – to help them further their community and regional development aspirations.

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