

Defining Diversity: Creating Community

Project Overview

Defining Diversity: Creating Community (DDCC)

was a two-year participatory action research project developed through a partnership among Vancouver Island University (VIU), Tla'amin Community Health, and the Powell River Model Community Project. It was designed in response to concerns that a lack of understanding between groups and individuals would stall progress in dealing with Powell River's looming social issues, caused by a slowing economy and government cut backs.

Initially, the project consisted of four two-day community education course offerings, followed by participant surveys and focus groups, and concluded with a learning circle open to all. The intent was to introduce citizens to an asset-based community development approach, to expand their definition and the value placed on diversity, and to empower grass roots engagement. Designed in a linear way, the project's direction and components quickly evolved in multiple directions with the contributions of its participants and supporters. Also known as **emergent design**, this concept of directional evolution became pivotal to the DDCC project's success. Examples of this included: changes in participant recruitment strategies, redevelopment of course curriculum, and changes to the focus group questions. Additional initiatives grew out of the DDCC project, including the Groundswell 2014 Conference, the ensuing documentary films, and the ongoing projects funded by the Taos Institute such as *Let the Sparks Fly* (articles with business leaders and entrepreneurs), and the Audio Walks.

In the final analysis, the DDCC project's original goals were met – perhaps even exceeded – but in unexpected ways. The **efficacy of an educational approach** to social and economic change was demonstrated by the richness of the findings from surveys, focus groups and the learning circle. These findings include evidence of increased community capacity, resilience and sustainability. The project also increased, **citizen contribution** and involvement as, collectively, participant groups felt better networked with one another and more able to extend their network.

RESEARCH DATA

Themes which emerged from the research helped us understand the powerful impact the DDCC course and project had on participants as well as the ripple effect experienced by the wider community. **Measurable shifts** in individual perspectives and roles – and increased responsibility – are well documented and are largely



credited to *locatedness*, or the creation of a safe learning environment where difficult conversations could take place in the context of mutual respect and peace. Participation of First Nations elders was especially powerful.

Individuals noted a **greater connection** with one another and between agencies, groups and services previously operating in isolation. They expressed concern that **prejudice and discrimination still exist**, limiting social networks and supports for some. However, participants felt energized by the course and more able to **take actions** that impacted social well-being. They articulated strategies to **sustain citizen action** over time, including sharing experiences and stories, involving aboriginal leadership and youth,



Learning Circle discussion, from most to least mentions.

centralizing information about volunteer and other opportunities, and continuing projects like this that shift mindsets. They confirmed that *many small shifts and actions can result in large scale change*.

Participants explored the meaning of economic well-being and began an exploration of their *vision for a thriving Powell River* where success is measured by many quality of life factors rather than only material well-being. They assert that factors like inclusiveness, youth leadership, citizen engagement, diversity, and celebration are the hallmarks of a community in which people want to live, work, and raise their families. Participants are interested in a local economy, in local food security, in recycling, and in cooperatives. They see these as foundations for an alternative economy that compliments more traditional development.

Participants share the city's priority, which is to attract young people and families back to Powell River. In order to achieve this goal, participants believe that *leaders must intentionally engage others and share leadership*. This involves *taking risks and working in new ways* with people we may traditionally have disagreed with or avoided.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A range of diverse recommendations were generated aimed at sparking further engagement in our collective social and economic well-being.

- **Strengthen roles of education and educators.** For example, find ways to offer the DDCC course locally and in other communities.
- **Move beyond Powell River and generate knowledge exchange.** The social and economic situation in Powell River is not unique but our approach to change may be. Partnerships with other universities and communities hold potential to scale up the innovative work being done here, while providing opportunities for knowledge exchange in multiple directions.
- **Value diversity in our relationships.** Support a more collaborative and understanding approach between people previously divided. Intentionally work across divides.
- **Create a shared vision.** Conversations that explore the collective definition of quality of life in our

region and that confirm a lower emphasis on material wealth provide a starting point.

- **Expand leadership skills.** A list of leadership traits was developed, based on the willingness to trust in the process and in others and a deep desire to serve the community.
- **Shift toward action.** The message is that the exploration phase can continue but that, simultaneously, the community is ready for something bigger to happen now.

NEXT STEPS

Participants identified the following priorities for further development and research: (1) a mutual project to help sustain participants' interconnectedness, (2) More diverse forms of community engagement, particularly involving business owners and the corporate sector, and (3) continued design of projects which inspire connection and new action. Upcoming activities include:

- **Groundswell 2016 Conference.** Funding has been secured by the Powell River Employment Program Society (PREP) in partnership with the City of Powell River.
- **Illuminating New Economic Possibilities.** A follow up project to the *Let the Sparks Fly* articles, led by Vancouver Island University and engaging Powell River Chamber of Commerce members.

Participants in the DDCC project moved beyond our original focus on education and research and advocated for action to advance our social and economic well-being. To this end, we recommend initiatives and community development projects be undertaken using emergent design methods. The Powell River area is a community in transition. Continuing to embrace diversity and build on community strengths will fuel the innovation required to meet the pressing need for social and economic evolution.

LEADERSHIP SKILLS

- mentorship
- diversity
- develop relationships
- create safe spaces for community dialogue

