

Kansas State University Libraries

New Prairie Press

Adult Education Research Conference

2011 Conference Proceedings (Toronto, ON,
Canada)

Transitions from Aboriginal-Controlled Post Secondary Institutes to Public Post Secondary Institutions

Frances Hunt-Jinnouchi
University of Victoria

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc>

 Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Administration Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

Recommended Citation

Hunt-Jinnouchi, Frances (2011). "Transitions from Aboriginal-Controlled Post Secondary Institutes to Public Post Secondary Institutions," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2011/papers/44>

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Transitions from Aboriginal-Controlled Post Secondary Institutes to Public Post Secondary Institutions

Frances Hunt-Jinnouchi
University of Victoria

Abstract: In spite of the significant strides that have been made in Aboriginal education over the last decade, a gap still exists in the number of Aboriginal students who enter and complete post-secondary education. Through a quantitative, community-based research approach the University of Victoria collaborated with the Indigenous Adult & Higher Learning Association (IAHLA) to gauge the barriers impacting transitions and identify factors contributing to successful transitions between IAHLA to Public Post-Secondary Institutions.

The University of Victoria's (UVic) Office of Indigenous Affairs (INAF) and the Office of Community-Based Research (OCBR) partnered with the Indigenous Adult & Higher Learning Association (IAHLA) to conduct a comprehensive two-year community-based research (CBR) project to examine the transition experience for Aboriginal adult learners in Aboriginal-controlled post secondary institutes to Public Post-Secondary Institutions (PPSI) in British Columbia. The Aboriginal Transitions Research Project (ATRP) was one of three transition research projects conducted by PPSIs in BC within the same time frame (2008/09, 2009/10).

Research Design and Research Goals

The design of the research project is a Community-Based Participatory approach guided by a Steering Committee comprised of members of the IAHLA Board, OCBR, INAF, the First Nations Education Steering Committee, including research guidance from senior scholars from UVic. The Community-Based Participatory research approach was identified as a central strength of the overall research study by the chair of IAHLA, and an outcome from a Roundtable Discussion of the Steering Committee led to this point, as one of the six key points regarding *new insights into the research*: "The research approach used in this project should be used as a standard for conducting post-secondary education research involving Aboriginal people and First Nations" (ATRP Executive Report, 2009, p. 8). The process was collaborative from inception to completion and emphasized a qualitative and phenomenological methodology. In addition, ATRP included a Research Team of seven community-based researchers, six of whom are Indigenous and who jointly brought distinctive and indispensable community-based research experiences to the process. In total 175 people participated in the interview process. All told, two main questions were asked: For those that have transitioned what helped you, and for those transitioning in the future what will help you? What role did your Aboriginal-controlled post-secondary institute play in this transition?

Community-Based Research and Community-Based Participatory Research share similar goals and approaches with Indigenous research methodology in their inclusivity, relationship building and social justice focus, and especially in providing space for community voice and active community participation in defining the question, research process, research ethics and analysis of the findings. CBR basically adheres to maintaining non-colonial research, which was

a fundamental goal of the Steering Committee, Research Team and community partners; thus, CBR is an organic fit with the principles guiding the ATRP.

The overall goals of the research project that were established by the funder, the Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development (reformed as the Ministry of Science and Universities in 2010) are:

- To increase the success of Aboriginal students in their post-secondary education while documenting the best practices amongst IAHLA institutes pertaining to the transition for Aboriginal adult students to PPSIs;
- To identify which factors or variables contribute to the successful transition of Aboriginal students in First Nations institutes to PPSIs while identifying the factors that constitute barriers for students and administrators in the transition process.

According to a summary of the ATRP the “working hypothesis for this research project is that Aboriginal-controlled institutes increase transition and completion rates for Aboriginal learners through the post-secondary education system” (ATRP Executive Summary, 2009, p. 4).

Situating Myself

As is proper and an expected protocol in my community, I am required to situate myself, to let people know who I am, where I come from and my Indian name because it is through these identifiers that my history and traditional rights are carried forward. I believe this is necessary from an Indigenous perspective but also for the reader to get a sense of who I am in a way that transcends my work or educational titles. It is important to locate myself, in so doing the reader better understands why the writing and/or research is important to me. The information I seek is not necessarily for me, it is in response to information and knowledge that I believe my community and other Indigenous communities need to grow, nurture and heal; therefore, my biases are important for the reader to know. I am a Kwakiutl/Koskimo woman from northern-Vancouver Island. One of my Indian names is Jsinau. My communities are rich in culture and heritage. I am an advocate of community-based and Aboriginal-controlled education.

In my role as the Project Director for the ATRP, I was intimately involved throughout, and was extremely interested in the findings, not only what would be gleaned from the findings but what PPSIs could learn from the Indigenous voices at the community level. I am currently the Director of the Office of Indigenous Affairs at UVic and was also the founding Director of the Indigenous Adult & Higher Learning Association, as well as a director of two Aboriginal-controlled institutes, one that is remote and the other urban. I anxiously awaited the findings because I hoped some of what I had observed to be barriers to transition would be brought to light. Much of what I know, based on my experience is anecdotal, there is little by way of literature in this regard. So the research results were highly anticipated.

IAHLA Described

The majority of Aboriginal-controlled institutes in British Columbia are members of the Indigenous Adult & Higher Learning Association (IAHLA). The framework they work within includes the following five components: personal development, leadership, cultural development, wisdom development, student satisfaction and academics (Tindall Consulting, 2009). At the time the ATRP research was being conducted there were 35 member institutes, currently that number has increased to 38 member institutes.

Most notably in the 1970's (although some advocacy in this regard had been done prior) Indigenous leaders called for *Indian control of Indian education*. This is demonstrated by the increased numbers of Aboriginal-controlled post secondary institutes in BC and throughout Canada. In BC ninety-percent of IAHLA institutes are situated on reserves. For the past three decades these institutes have developed with little more than good will and volunteerism into vibrant, critical and relevant institutes playing central roles in preparing Aboriginal adult learners to pursue higher education. And yet, to date only one of the 38 IAHLA institutes receives base funding, and this is a result of this particular institute being funded as a public post-secondary institution, and falling under provincial policies. Most IAHLA institutes are portable, second and third-hand used buildings, in church basements or rooms in the back of band office buildings.

IAHLA was formed in 2003 to address the needs of its diverse institutes throughout the province, some of which focus on Adult Basic Education (A.B.E), others on trades and ABE, while others provide certificates, diplomas and degrees in partnership with PPSIs, or combinations of all of these. The majority of the institutes also include language and culture programming (NVIT, UVic and IAHLA, 2008). The IAHLA institutes listed below were selected to represent the broad geography and types of education frameworks and/or funding mechanisms in BC. In this, the Steering Committee believed the research information would impart a voice conducive to the association as a whole and would reflect urban, coastal, and remote locales.

IAHLA Institute	Location	
En'owkin Centre	Penticton	Cultural/Academic
Gitksan Wet'suwet'en Education Society	Hazelton	Northern
Heiltsuk College	Bella Bella	Remote Coastal
Native Education College	Vancouver	Urban
Nicola Valley Institute Of Technology	Merrit	Public
	Burnaby	Public
Saanich Adult Education Centre	Saanich	Nominal Role Funded

Research Findings

Although there are no real surprises in the report findings, there are lessons learned. Perhaps the most shocking revelation was that homelessness was identified as an issue impacting transition success. This came as a surprise because we tend to think about homelessness as being an urban issue. Ultimately, the findings helped to validate what many on the Steering Committee already knew and had been saying all along—that strong Indigenous self-identity supports transition and success because adult learners are able to gain a stronger self confidence and are thereby better equipped to handle the culture shock related to the new environment an adult learner finds him or herself in, often within an urban setting. The findings also confirm that IAHLA institutes provide holistic environments, conducive to building self-identity. In these community environments, students can access Elders and other community resources, human and otherwise, contributing to the transmission of cultural knowledge, and therefore to strong

Indigenous self-identity. Within this context, academic and Euro-western education is adapted to and interpreted through an Indigenous lens.

Subsequently, the data did address a gap by providing base-line data critical to the development of a starting point to improve transition strategies for both IAHLA and PPSIs. It is important to note that the “transition between and within these two types of learning contexts cannot be considered in isolation of one another” (Office of Indigenous Affairs, 2010, p. 6). The report points to the need to consider the transition process as a continuum, together.

Overall, the primary findings found in the ATRP Executive Report (2009) conclude the following:

The Learning Journey has been fraught with challenges for many Aboriginal students due to the impacts of generations attending residential school, racism, discrimination and the lack of meaningful, relevant cultural curriculum (p. 6).

The research draws attention to the importance of IAHLA institutes for students, Elders, political leaders and instructors because the institutes provide culturally safe environments for students to build strong self-identity and support the need for students to be competent in not only academics but in culture and in Indigenous language. As well, there is compelling evidence that IAHLA and PPSIs need to strengthen and balance the power dynamics in their relationships and need to strive to build *authentic* and *reciprocal* partnerships in order to align the processes in which Aboriginal adult learners are supported throughout their entire educational journey, starting with access, to transition, to retention, then completion and finally, transition back to their communities and/or to meaningful employment and careers and/or to further post secondary studies.

Although the primary voices that were targeted in the research were from IAHLA institutes (adult learners, Elders, faculty, staff, governance) there was an invitation for input from PPSI as well. The four PPSI that participated include Camosun College, University of British Columbia Okanagan, University of Northern British Columbia and Vancouver Island University. There are four key themes that emerged regarding barriers and seven key themes regarding successful transition strategies to PPSI that they identified. Examples of the barriers consist of difficulties in balancing school, culture, family and community responsibilities, funding to support rent, transportation, and child care (especially when leaving their home communities), and a lack of being prepared for post-secondary studies in general. A sample of successful transition strategies focus on the importance of Elders to provide cultural and spiritual support, the advantages of comprehensive orientations to campus life as well as the benefits of academic and career counselling.

It still remains, however, that there is no substantive research regarding the barriers or support systems in place for adult learners transitioning from IAHLA to PPSI and there is little by way of information about IAHLA institutes in spite of the tenacity of IAHLA institute leaders to keep the doors open with no promise of core funding or government support. A handful of the IAHLA institutes have struggled and have been faced with strong headwinds for over thirty years.

Year Two -Towards Action

Overall, Indigenous perspectives provide a unique lens from which to examine situations from a more holistic and collective perspective—the Indigenous spiritual spheres, holistic approaches and Indigenous world views are dimensions that were weaved throughout the ATRP research findings. The recommendations for the first year data gathering phase led into the following three areas, to facilitate Aboriginal student transition, to recommend further research and to support experiential learning pilot projects at select IAHLA institutes. These recommendations guided the development of the following three pilot projects: 1) Reciprocal Institutional Partnership; 2) Transition Handbook; and 3) Transformative Indigenous Learning Strategies, “and were designed to enhance and support the research that had been completed, focusing on a strength-based model, not a deficit model” (Office of Indigenous Affairs, 2010, p. 7).

An example of one of the Institutional Partnership pilot projects resulted in comprehensive planning meetings between the Chemainus Native College and Vancouver Island University who developed a formal agreement encompassing priority-setting, transition strategies, programming and an intercultural communication plan. A Transition Handbook to prepare adult learners attending IAHLA institutes was designed after a similar handbook model that was developed by Heiltsuk College in Bella Bella, also an IAHLA institute. The Transformative Indigenous Learning pilot projects were incredibly inspiring. One example is the Saanich Adult Education Centre who focused on language revitalization under the umbrella of the Master Apprentice Program, with extraordinary results. That project has led to many of those students enrolling in UVic’s Bachelor of Education in Language Revitalization.

Adult Learner Perspective

Former students of IAHLA institutes indicated the most significant contribution that Aboriginal-controlled institutes make is to provide a *stepping stone* in their pursuit of higher education. Moreover, it is the education framework which is grounded in Indigenous epistemology and ontology that has the biggest impacts on the adult learners, and the move away from the conventional linear education journey. However, a provocative statement was made by a long-time respected leader of an IAHLA institute at the wrap-up forum for the ATRP in October, 2010 where she strongly asserted that the Aboriginal-controlled institutes are **not** stepping stones to feed into public post secondary institutions, and instead, they are sovereign places of learning, governed by community leaders and Elders, designed to resist mainstream pedagogy in order to retain cultural practice and understanding and to revitalize language and traditional practice. She was very clear in her message and belief that PPSI cannot duplicate the education frameworks that IAHLA institutes have developed because of the systemic nature of both, and she suggests PPSIs should not assume their goal is to have their students’ transition to Western-mainstream institutions. The message tenaciously pointed to her desire to control and create their own education destiny because the Western-model of education that has been imposed has failed Indigenous peoples miserably.

A student who had transitioned to a PPSI from an IAHLA institute recommended that adult learners should: “Find out everything about your culture and where you come from because if you are equipped with these things about your cultural heritage, it doesn’t matter where you go in this world, you’ll succeed” (ATRP Executive Summary, 2009, p. 48). This statement supports

the belief that adult learners do better when they build self-identity and knowledge in their history, culture and language.

Walking in Two Worlds

IAHLA institutes create education environments to support what I have termed *dual world competencies within competing environments*. The dual worlds are: 1) Western-colonial; 2) Indigenous-traditional. The competing environments are the dual worlds and they often have conflicting epistemologies. Indigenous learners begin their educational journey at this precarious starting line, between two worlds, and throughout their journey tend to feel pulled between the competing environments. Fundamentally, I am referring to the two spectrums of knowing (epistemologies), Western versus Indigenous and colonizer versus colonized.

Tanzanian President Julius K. Nyerere wrote about “the capacity of education in an independent nation to unchain people just as it had been used by the colonial powers to enchain a people” (Hall, 2005, p. 3), supporting the potential of Indigenous community-based practice to effect change in learners and communities leading to the development of dual world competencies, while also maintaining cultural identity and integrity. To understand the framework required for Indigenous community-based education programming then, Indigenous decolonizing research methods should be employed and should drive the overall process. I believe that is why it has been suggested that the community-based research approach we used, with its strong emphasis on Indigenous protocol was referred to as a standard and a model for all research with Aboriginal peoples and communities.

The premise of the research is the fundamental belief that Indigenous peoples hold the solutions to the challenges they face. They need to define their own problems as well as the answers, on their own terms. A written statement shared by Dr. Jeannette Armstrong, Director of the En’owkin Centre at the Fourth Annual Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education Forum in Vancouver, BC in November 2007 supports this. It is found in the opening introduction of the First Nations Education Steering Committee report:

We have to find a way to fulfill our mandate, to teach our students about the mainstream, without giving up ourselves, without assimilating into those boxes that don’t meet our needs. We must be respectful and understand those institutions complete us in a way; we need for our members to be fully equipped to deal with today’s needs in society. But we must find ways to maintain our sovereignty, to maintain and support our cultural learning, while also making sure that our students can move into those institutions at their most excellent—well equipped with their cultural tools, their cultural knowledge, their information. How do we do that? It is the responsibility not only of Aboriginal institutes and communities, but also those partners that are important to us (FNESC Policy Background Paper, May 2008).

Looking Forward

It is important that the research information be used to influence provincial policy and transition programming development, as well as provide opportunities and resources for PPSIs and IAHLA institutes to work together, to nurture relationships, and to create collaborative approaches to address the continuum of transition needs for adult learners by learning from the successful pilot projects, particularly the five-year plan between the Chemainus Native College and Vancouver Island University that support transition between institutions. “Fundamentally, while the focus of this project has been on transition from IAHLA institutes to public post-secondary institutions, it was learned that this is not an ‘either-or’ dynamic, but rather a ‘win-win’ process (ATRP Executive Summary, 2009, p. 9). Clearly both forms of education institutions need to assist each other and jointly develop strategies to better transition Aboriginal learners.

Too often, Indigenous research is theoretically based, academically driven and has little in practical measure to give back to help in community capacity development, resulting in widening the chasm between the community and the academy. The Final Research Report (June 2009) supports a decolonized approach to education that gives voice and power back to Aboriginal peoples to define their own educational frameworks. This will, I believe, be the biggest challenge for PPSI—relinquishing power and trusting that Indigenous knowledge and practice is equally valid, and thus supporting the process and building authentic partnerships in order to see the transition strategy building process through.

References

- First Nations Education Steering Committee (2008) *Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education in British Columbia: A Place for Aboriginal Institutes*. Vancouver: FNEESC.
- Hall, B. (2005) In From the Cold? Reflections on Participatory Research 1970-2005 in *Convergence* 38(1), 5-24.
- National Indian Brotherhood (1972). *Indian Control of Indian Education*. Ottawa: NIB.
- Nicola Valley Institute of Technology, University of Victoria and Indigenous Adult & Higher Learning Association. (2008). *Aboriginal and Post-Secondary Institutions Working Together in BC: Best Practices in Partnership Agreements*.
- Office of Indigenous Affairs (2009) *Aboriginal Transition Research Project Executive Summary*. Victoria: University of Victoria.
- Office of Indigenous Affairs (2010). *ATRP: Year Two Pilot Project Report*. Victoria: University of Victoria.
- Tindall Consulting. (2009). *IAHLA Data Collection Project 2008/09*. Victoria: Tindall Consulting.