

EMBRACING ABORIGINAL VALUES AND TRADITIONS IN A UNIONIZED ENVIRONMENT

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I. INTRODUCTION

In 1998 the Nicola Valley Institute of Technology (NVIT) in British Columbia faced new challenges in its efforts to maintain its uniqueness as an Aboriginal public post-secondary institution. The employees of NVIT had become certified as a trade union under the College and Institute Educators Association (CIEA) and NVIT had to negotiate a first collective agreement with its faculty and staff. In these negotiations there was potential for an *us vs. them* mentality differing markedly from the traditional values and cultures being taught by our Aboriginal Elders. By becoming unionized, NVIT was forced to consider three key questions: (a) Was NVIT unique as an Aboriginal post-secondary institution? (b) What impact would the trade union have on the ability to maintain Aboriginal culture, values, and traditions? (c) What steps could or should NVIT take to ensure its continued status as an Aboriginal institution in a unionized environment?

Since its inception as a private post-secondary institution in 1983, the institution has struggled to maintain its uniqueness as an Aboriginal organization. Its challenges were

intensified when NVIT achieved its public status in 1995, and certified as a trade union in May of 1998. And NVIT anticipates further collective bargaining issues as it attempts to expand its delivery of programs and increase its number of employees. A clear strategic direction is therefore necessary to ensure that the collective agreement enables employees to function with some degree of Aboriginal values and norms. As the institution enters this exciting period in its history, it needs to examine its ability to develop and maintain its uniqueness as an Aboriginal organization.

When NVIT opened its doors in 1983, it attracted twelve students and classes were held in the basement of a local band office. Today, NVIT has grown into an Aboriginal public post-secondary institution that serves hundreds of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students from across British Columbia and Canada. Currently NVIT offers on-site courses in College Readiness, Natural Resources, Indigenous and Academic Studies, Administrative Studies, Social Work, Early Childhood Education, Community Economic Development, and an Information Technician Certificate. In addition, NVIT has a very successful continuing education department

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delivering off-site courses in Community Economic Development and Forestry in First Nations communities across Canada. In sum, NVIT has been successful in providing quality education to Aboriginal students in a culturally appropriate setting.

Focusing on the case of NVIT, this study explores how an Aboriginal institution can identify useful Aboriginal culture, values, and traditions and incorporate them into the institution's organizational structure. In particular, the study has five main objectives:

1. To determine how NVIT is operating as an Aboriginal institution and to elicit opinions on how it can improve as an Aboriginal organization.
2. To gain insight into how employees view the union in relation to the Aboriginal culture of the organization.
3. To assess whether or not the employees feel that participating at the provincial common table would be beneficial for NVIT, and whether or not NVIT should attempt to incorporate Aboriginal concepts into its local collective agreement.
4. To learn what employees deem more important in leadership positions: an Aboriginal person or a non-Aboriginal person who is experienced in the public post-secondary system.
5. To develop a list of recommendations for the NVIT community outlining the steps required for NVIT to maintain its Aboriginal culture, values, and traditions.

In other words, the overall purpose is to determine whether or not NVIT is operating in a manner consistent with Aboriginal¹ ways and philosophies, and whether or not Aboriginal culture can be maintained during times of organizational change. In one-on-one personal interviews, a number of NVIT employees shared their views, experiences, and perceptions on the three key questions posed for NVIT by unionization.

In a time of organizational change it is important to understand the dynamics involved in maintaining Aboriginal culture, values, and traditions in an organization that offers services that are dominated by mainstream ideas and culture. In order to have any success in this area, people must understand what makes an organization uniquely Aboriginal. Is it the

mission and vision, the employees, the Board of Governors, the philosophy, or is it something different? Traditional culture and values are often passed down from Aboriginal Elders and emphasize community and the ability to work together. This organizational culture is quite different from the modern mainstream organizational structure that is often hierarchical and finds management and employees with opposing attitudes, goals, and viewpoints.

The major findings of the study include:

1. The Nicola Valley Institute of Technology is a unique Aboriginal institution.
2. It is not clear whether or not NVIT is "Aboriginal enough".
3. NVIT should have a president that is Aboriginal and experienced in the public post-secondary system.
4. The majority of employees at NVIT should be Aboriginal.
5. The Board and Senior Administration must play a leading role in developing and maintaining the Aboriginal essence of NVIT.
6. Unhindered unionization may have a negative impact on the Aboriginal uniqueness and operations of NVIT.
7. NVIT may be able to unionize and maintain its Aboriginal essence and qualities if Aboriginal concepts and ideas are captured in NVIT's local collective agreement.
8. Ideally, everyone employed at NVIT must commit to maintaining and developing NVIT's Aboriginal essence, especially given the potential negative impact of unionization.

II. THE CULTURALLY SENSITIVE DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT OF NVIT'S NEW CAMPUS

During the same time period as union certification (1998), another significant event took place that it was hoped would help maintain Aboriginal culture at NVIT: the provincial government approved a new campus with construction beginning in the spring of 2000. The NVIT new campus doors opened for the first time on January 2, 2002. To celebrate this occasion, the Elders, staff, students, and guests marched to the beat of drums from the old building in downtown Merritt to the new campus at the top of the hill. The new building means for the first time in the history of the institution that the entire

NVIT organization exists under one roof. The Elders of the Nicola Valley were involved throughout the planning of the new campus. In November 1999, a special naming ceremony was held on the site of the new campus. The Elders informed the NVIT community that the site was to be called "Nmicaqtn", which, when translated, means "where the Eagle is perched".

In addition to the naming ceremony, the institution took a number of steps to help maintain the Aboriginal spirit of the college. The first step was to hire an architect who was Aboriginal, and who was committed to building an environmentally friendly structure. In addition, the planners tried to incorporate as much of the circle, an Aboriginal symbol, into the construction as possible. The building emerges out of the earth, and therefore is in touch with Mother Earth. The main entrance is from the East, which is significant in First Nations culture as the East is where the sun rises and indicates a new beginning. The design contains a significant amount of wood throughout the building, and around the outside of the building, there is a bandwidth of wood similar to that of a drum. At the entry to the building, there is a meeting place complete with a ceremonial fireplace. The Elders' office is located in the centre of the building and a new Elders' Council is working effectively in advising the institution on key cultural decisions. At the entrance people are able to look straight through to the heart of the circle where a ceremonial arbor will eventually be located. In these ways the building attempts to represent the Aboriginal culture of the institution.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

In a major study of Aboriginal culture, values, and traditions in a unionized environment, it is important to have a sound understanding of culture and traditions in Aboriginal organizations and communities across Canada. Overall, Aboriginal organizations are different from "mainstream" organizations in that they have emerged from a group of people who are culturally, socially, politically, and economically unique. According to Berger (1991), the culture of Native people amounts to more than crafts and carvings; it includes the tradition of decision-making by consensus, a respect for the wisdom of the Elders, a belief in the extended family, and a special relationship with the land.

In addition to holding a high regard for the environment, Aboriginal people are willing to share all of these beliefs in one form or another within their cultures, even though they have been under unremitting pressure to abandon them. Ross (1992) argues that white society is unwilling to acknowledge that North American Indians have different values and institutions that have not lost their relevance and application despite five hundred years of cultural and technological "progress". As a result of mainstream beliefs, traditional structures such as the extended family and tribal groups are struggling to maintain their importance in the lives of Aboriginal peoples. The struggle, Krotz (1990) argues, has been particularly difficult for the Aboriginal youth. As Native people move from generation to generation, Aboriginal values risk being lost in the process.

Elders and Indigenous Knowledge

The acknowledgement and promotion of the wisdom of Aboriginal Elders is critical to the success of Aboriginal organizations in maintaining Aboriginal traditions and culture. The Elders bear the responsibility of passing down stories and ensuring that today's children are aware of their past. In an interview with Georges Erasmus, former National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, Krotz (1990) discovered that the basic teaching of the Elders is to respect and value diversity. According to Ross (1992), the Elders know better than anyone how much of their culture and traditions have been eroded or lost over the last one hundred years. In an interview with the Carrier Sekani Tribal Council, Cassidy and Bish (1989) learned that the Elders have brought both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to a point where most understand cultural differences. Still, Aboriginal people must learn, understand, *and* use their knowledge, wisdom, and teachings in an effort to maintain the culture. Elders play a significant role in education, history, and politics, as they pass on the wisdom of their peoples (Ryan, 1996; Cassidy, 1991).

The Era of Assimilation

The literature underlines the history of non-Aboriginal people of Canada wanting Aboriginal people to adopt a "mainstream" way of life, regardless of the Aboriginal people's preference. Asch (1998) links this attitude of non-Aboriginal

people to ethnocentrism, a form of bias that favours what is familiar and denigrates what is different. Mainstream society viewed Aboriginal people as different and therefore inferior, and its goal was to make them adapt to the European way of life. According to Kulchyski (1995), *hegemony* includes attempts on the part of the dominant society to assimilate Aboriginal peoples. To Aboriginal leaders, assimilation meant the process of making Aboriginal culture irrelevant in the lives of Aboriginal peoples. Through the strength of the Aboriginal communities, and the wisdom of the Elders, however, Aboriginal people of Canada have resisted assimilation. They are peoples striving for the dignity of their culture, the integrity of their territories, and the right to manage their own affairs. Resisting most attempts at assimilation, Aboriginal peoples have as their goal Aboriginal rights and Aboriginal control over their own affairs. Indeed, Aboriginal people differ significantly from white people in the way they approach the issue of assimilation. According to Krotz (1990), white people seek solutions, while the Indians want justice. Furthermore, when Aboriginal people consider Aboriginal rights, they consider the right to the enjoyment of culture and the right to survival and self-determination (Asch, 1988).

Aboriginal Educational Institutions and Culture

The ability of Aboriginal organizations to maintain their culture is important to the survival of Aboriginal people and to their fight against assimilation. Culture is a vital force in Native people's lives because it distinguishes them from the rest of the dominant society (Kulchyski, 1995; Berger, 1991). Critical to the perseverance of Aboriginal culture is the environment in which the children and youth grow up. This places even greater importance on an Aboriginal education in Aboriginal schools maintaining academic credibility in a culturally appropriate setting. Often Aboriginal schools struggle to teach Aboriginal identity, while gaining academic credibility in a competitive 21st century (Ryan, 1996; Krotz, 1990). They often confront a belief that Aboriginal schools do not meet the standards and criteria of mainstream schools. The too widespread perception is that Indian schools are for dumb children (Krotz, 1990).

However, there is a need for Aboriginal children to be taught in a culturally sensitive

place. Unless children can be brought up with both an appreciation of Indian culture and an education to function in the larger society, Indian people may be committing cultural genocide (Cassidy & Bish, 1989). Aboriginal people need the necessary skills to compete in the world, but they shouldn't have to cease being Indian in the process of getting those qualifications (Krotz, 1990). It is apparent that if Aboriginal people are going to resist assimilation and enhance their own sense of identity and culture, then they must do this through Aboriginal education. "Indian control of Indian education" is a phrase that is used often in Aboriginal educational institutions. The National Indian Brotherhood submitted a policy paper on Indian Control of Indian Education in the 1970s that was influential in the movement towards self-government. The paper maintained that because the Federal government was responsible for Indian education, it was their responsibility to transfer the authority for education to the local Band level (Cassidy & Bish, 1989). Although the paper requested local control of education, the government has been reluctant to relinquish control. Yet, when the government denies First Nations people the control of their children's education, it demonstrates a lack of trust, respect, and status (Ryan, 1996).

A number of authors agree that there are three ways in which Indian people can achieve Indian control over Indian education. The first places Aboriginal education in the hands of the local Bands; the second incorporates Native cultural values, including Native languages, into the curriculum; and the third involves the parents and community members in education at a local level (Roberts, 1982; Ryan, 1996). Those concerned with Native education should listen to what Native peoples have to say about these matters (Ryan, 1996).

Aboriginal education today remains caught in a disturbing tension. On the one hand, Aboriginal people need the skills and knowledge to succeed in the dominant culture. On the other hand, they have roots in a noble heritage from which they draw personal and collective strength (Roberts, 1982). In an interview, Krotz (1990) drew out Thomas Berger's opinion about Indian education. Berger believes that Native people should not only be the ones receiving an education at Aboriginal schools, but they also need to be managing the institutions, rather than having

the Native figureheads at the top, with the “white folks” managing the day-to-day operations.

With such a large population of Aboriginal people in British Columbia and across Canada, it is not surprising that a number of Aboriginal organizations offer services directed at Aboriginal people. However, the question remains: “What makes an Aboriginal organization uniquely Aboriginal?” While little has been written about these organizations, a number of scholars have begun to explore this interesting and vital area of research. David Newhouse (1996), in an unpublished interview with Warren Weir, defines and describes the Aboriginal organization. He describes three tests to determine whether or not an organization is Aboriginal. First, are the majority of people within the organization Aboriginal? Second, is the organization Aboriginally controlled? And third, does the organization operate according to Aboriginal values and customs? Weir (2000) builds on these tests and concludes that the “ideal” Aboriginal organization in Canada has the following five characteristics:

1. The majority of people within the organization are Aboriginal employees.
2. The organization has Aboriginal ownership and/or control.
3. The organization is practising Aboriginal culture and traditions.
4. The organization is connected to the Aboriginal community.
5. The architectural design of the buildings reflects the Aboriginal essence of the organization.

Newhouse (1996) describes Aboriginal organizations from an organizational behaviour point of view whereby people have made a conscious decision to attempt to operate in an Aboriginal fashion. He feels the organization’s culture and the culture which surrounds it must “fit”. Newhouse (1996) believes that Aboriginal organizations serve two purposes: one is the purpose for which they are designed, and the other is the contribution they make to the revitalization of Aboriginal communities.

IV. NVIT ABORIGINAL UNION-MANAGEMENT RELATIONS: A CASE STUDY

There are very few examples of an Aboriginal organization having a certified trade union. This

case study reflects events during the certification of the employees of the Nicola Valley Institute of Technology (NVIT). Started in the early 1980s as a private post-secondary institution, in 1995, NVIT received public status through an order in council of the provincial government and became a public post-secondary institution with a mandate to serve Aboriginal students and communities. After receiving public status in 1995, there was a push to become unionized. A representative of the College and Institute Educators Association (CIEA) was invited to attend a meeting with the employees of NVIT in 1996. At that time, there was a clear message that NVIT was an Aboriginal institute and that a mainstream union was not welcome at NVIT.

The employees of NVIT then tried to create a “collective” to negotiate wages and working conditions. Willing to work with this group, the NVIT Board of Governors instituted a Board Personnel committee. Unfortunately, the collective failed because of a lack of organization on the part of the employees and because of a lack of resources on the part of the institution.

In 1997, an organizational restructuring took place at NVIT resulting in a number of layoffs, and job security again became a concern. In early 1998, a CIEA representative was once again invited to a meeting of the employees of NVIT, resulting in a sign-up campaign that achieved the required number to be certified as a trade union. The NVIT administration was sent a notice informing them of the certification and asking them to attend a meeting to discuss union membership and determine who was to be included in the union and who was to be considered exempt.

Once membership was determined, The Nicola Valley Institute of Technology Employee Association (NVITEA) gave NVIT notice of intent to bargain a first collective agreement. During the first protocol agreement meeting, NVIT invited one of its Elders to come to the meeting. The Elder opened the meeting with a prayer and proceeded to inform the two bargaining committees that unions were not the First Nations way and that it was important that NVIT continue to be a community. The two bargaining committees agreed that the collective agreement must be reflective of Aboriginal culture and traditions in order for it to be effective at NVIT.

The union took the first step in maintaining NVIT's Aboriginal community by having one union for both faculty and staff. While not the first college in British Columbia to do so, NVIT is a rarity among public post-secondary institutions in having both faculty and support staff under one collective agreement.

The bargaining committees realized that to negotiate an Aboriginal collective agreement, it was going to take a considerable amount of time and effort. After a number of personnel changes on the union's bargaining committee, the first collective agreement was finally reached after more than two years of bargaining. The NVIT collective agreement was unique in that it contained a number of clauses that were reflective of NVIT's uniqueness as an Aboriginal institution. A sample of these articles is listed below:

Article 1.2 Uniqueness — The parties recognize NVIT as a unique Aboriginal post secondary institution that has a preference for hiring Aboriginal staff, teaching Aboriginal curriculum, and maintaining Aboriginal culture, values, and traditions.

Article 14 Discipline, Suspension, Dismissal — The Employer may choose to use an Aboriginal traditional method for conflict resolution, or may choose to use a different method.

Article 16.1.4 Posting — NVIT reserves the right to favour persons of Aboriginal ancestry in hiring and promotion, as justified under an exemption to the BC Human Rights Act. NVIT is committed to filling vacant positions with an Aboriginal person.

Article 16.2.1 Hiring Procedure — ... The remaining positions on the hiring committee may include an Elder, a student, a Senior Administrator, and/or other employees who are familiar with the vacant position....

Article 21.3 Layoff — Given that NVIT maintains the right to favour persons of Aboriginal ancestry, seniority is one of the deciding factors governing layoffs and recall after layoff.

Article 23.5.2 Cultural Leave — An employee may request special leave for the purposes of cultural leave....

Article 24.2.4 Aboriginal Day — June 21, National Aboriginal Day is not a statutory holiday. The Board of NVIT believes it is extremely important that NVIT, as a recognized leader in the First Nations

community, show its support for this National holiday. Although NVIT does not have its own celebration at this time, it is probable that in the near future, NVIT will have its own Aboriginal Day festivities. Accordingly, the decision on how Aboriginal Day will be celebrated will be considered on a year to year basis, and be determined by the President.

One of the reasons that the collective agreement took so long to negotiate was that the two bargaining committees did not bargain until all hours of the night. Bargaining was conducted at mutually agreed times and was generally finished by 9:00 p.m. at the latest. Although at times this stopped the flow of bargaining, it again showed the commitment of both NVIT and the union to ensuring that the collective agreement worked for both parties. Rather than the two parties having opposite goals during bargaining, NVIT and the union recognized that negotiating an Aboriginal collective agreement was unique and beneficial to the entire NVIT community.

Once the two bargaining committees came to a tentative agreement, the union took it back to its membership for ratification, while NVIT requested approval from the BC Public Sector Employers Council (PSEC) and presented the collective agreement for Board approval at an NVIT Board of Governors meeting. The collective agreement was approved by all parties and became effective April 1, 2000, until March 31, 2003. In May of 2003, the parties agreed to a one-year extension to March 31, 2004.

As NVIT entered the year 2000 and approached the end of its second year of its first collective agreement, the significance of becoming unionized became clearer. The union certification at NVIT was one in a series of Aboriginal organizations that were beginning to negotiate wages and working conditions with their employees. Although the Native court workers in British Columbia had been unionized for over five years, the Institute of Indigenous Government, the Interior Indian Friendship Centre, and the employees of both the Kamloops Indian Band and the Westbank First Nation were Aboriginal organizations that were entering or in the middle of negotiations. Like others across Canada, these Aboriginal organizations in British Columbia were struggling with issues of identity, and increasingly concerned about the impact of unionization on Aboriginal ways.

The major question shaping NVIT's future is whether it can maintain its Aboriginal culture and traditions in a unionized environment. By identifying the traits that make an ideal Aboriginal organization, NVIT may be able to shape the role that culture has both on the individual and on the organization at large. If the individual employees determine that the workplace is reflecting Aboriginal values and culture, their behaviour and attitudes may begin to have a positive effect on the students and their colleagues. Once the college community begins to understand the importance of culture and ways an organization can maintain its culture and be unionized, then perhaps it will encourage local First Nations communities to become more interested in the growth and development of their school. Continuing the ripple effect, Aboriginal communities across Canada might then recognize NVIT as a leader in reflecting and maintaining Aboriginal values, culture, and beliefs in a unionized environment, and make unionization succeed in their own Aboriginal organizations.

In effect, the collective agreement language accepted by the employees and the Board of NVIT has a significant impact on Aboriginal education for Aboriginal people. Perhaps other Aboriginal organizations will be able to use NVIT's agreement as a template to determine if, and how, culture may be maintained in a unionized environment. In addition to becoming a model for other Aboriginal organizations, NVIT could gain national exposure attracting students to the institution from across the country. Thus, NVIT has the opportunity to have a positive impact on Aboriginal organizations across Canada. Together with its union, the institution has the opportunity to maintain a collective agreement that is specifically designed to assist Aboriginal organizations, including language that recognizes the uniqueness of NVIT as an Aboriginal post-secondary institution.

The stakes are enormous because if NVIT is not successful in maintaining Aboriginal culture and traditions in a unionized environment, the institution could be at risk of becoming assimilated into BC's mainstream post-secondary system. To build on the positive features of NVIT's experience with unionization, the following recommendations are offered.

V. STUDY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. NVIT should define its mission and vision, develop a shared set of organizational values, clearly describe the Aboriginal culture and traditions the institution should adopt, and define how these priorities can be maintained within a unionized environment.
2. NVIT should take every opportunity to honour its Aboriginal essence through events that celebrate Aboriginal culture.
3. NVIT should create a healthy organizational community that is committed to teaching Indigenous curriculum in a culturally appropriate setting, while maintaining an environment of open communication.
4. NVIT should create a workplace environment that encourages creativity, innovation, safety, and supportiveness.
5. The Collective Agreement should recognize NVIT as a unique Aboriginal institution and include culturally sensitive language that supports traditional values and culture.
6. The NVIT Board of Governors, together with the rest of the NVIT community, must actively support the strategic initiatives and model the Aboriginal values, cultures and traditions highlighted in the strategic plan.
7. Elders must play a key role at NVIT, and training should be provided on how to choose and best utilize these unique human resources.

NOTE

1. Throughout the literature and during the personal interviews it became apparent that a number of terms were used to describe people of First Nations descent. For the purposes of this project, the terms will be used interchangeably, and will refer to individuals of Aboriginal descent.

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