

Contextualizing Lessons Learned from  
Sharing Knowledge~Building Relationships:  
Aboriginal Experiences in the Cross-Cultural  
Workplace

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Questioning, seeking information and understanding, and ultimately learning, always occurs within a context, and that context affects what questions are asked, how information and understanding are sought, and ultimately, what learning occurs. Knowing the place, the time, and the people involved in any quest for understanding is to know more about how the learning took place and how new understandings were developed. The larger context for the lessons from research that was facilitated through the *Sharing Knowledge~Building Relationships: Aboriginal Experiences in the Cross-Cultural Workplace* gathering reported elsewhere in this volume (Adair, Kwantes, Stonefish, Badea, & Weir, this volume) is important to consider as it shaped the questions, methods and learning. Personal experiences and societal context prompt questions, inform seeing, and impact understanding. This article, therefore, seeks to set the context for the information shared at this 2 day gathering with a focus on Aboriginal experiences in the workplace, setting the stage for understanding the time and the place for the learning that took place, by explicating the societal context, the location, and the activities of this event.

Personal backgrounds also influence questions and ways of knowing. While many individuals made great contributions to the conference in many ways, our core team for the event consisted of two Industrial/Organizational Psychologists on faculty at universities in Ontario, one educational administrator with experience in Indigenous economic develop-

ment, education, and training from BC and one Applied Social Psychology doctoral student from Ontario. The event included a number of graduate and undergraduate students from the University of Windsor, the University of Waterloo, and Vancouver Island University, Cowichan campus. This involvement offered students the opportunity to learn through helping to organize the gathering, taking notes during the sharing circles, and making connections with the attendees. All members of the team, to varying degrees, had broader personal connections with Aboriginal individuals in Canada and/or Native Americans.

## SOCIETAL CONTEXT

Aboriginal Canadians continue to experience substantially lower employment rates than non-Aboriginal Canadians despite the fact that this population is growing at six times the rate of the non-Aboriginal population (AHRC, 2013). This fastest-growing segment of the Canadian population (Universities Canada, 2015) is well poised to fill the labour shortage (AHRC, 2013) anticipated to follow mass retirements of baby boomers. Although numerous social and historical factors have limited the ability of Aboriginal Canadians to receive adequate education and employment, Aboriginal communities and organizations have begun to close education and skills gaps (AHRC, 2013). The continued lower employment rate suggests we need more information to understand how Aboriginal work experiences and outcomes differ from those of non-Aboriginals.

We initiated a conversation to address the dynamics of intercultural workplace encounters and to prioritize indigenous perspectives in workplace research (Gelfand et al., 2007). The first step was to facilitate a roundtable discussion at the 75th Canadian Psychological Association Convention in Ottawa, Ontario in June 2015, just days after the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's report. This national association of psychologists in varying fields has an Aboriginal Psychology Section which is a "community of psychologists and students interested in research, clinical practice, and teaching issues relevant to Aboriginal people" as well as being "an advocate for culturally appropriate research and clinical practice for Aboriginal people across Canada" ([www.cpa.ca/aboutcpa/cpasections/aboriginalpsychology/](http://www.cpa.ca/aboutcpa/cpasections/aboriginalpsychology/)). We held a roundtable discussion titled *Culture, Values, and Success in the Workplace: Understanding Employment Realities of Aboriginal Workers*, aimed at identifying issues relevant to Indigenous people in the workplace. This forum consisted of a designated space and time for interested parties to drop by and join a discussion. While attendance was light (7 attendees, including faculty, graduate students, an organizational consultant, and a representative from the Niagara Peninsula Aboriginal Area Management Board), the outcome of the discussion affirmed that it is important to identify unique cultural factors that may enhance or detract from employment outcomes of Aboriginal workers. The roundtable discussion identified several specific questions for further investigation:

1. How can we make policies of integration a reality in the workplace in a way that is respectful to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadian cultures?
2. What are the underlying values behind real or perceived cultural differences and how can we leverage cultural similarities?
3. To what degree do bicultural identity, identity conflict, and stereotype threat play a role in Aboriginals' workplace experiences and satisfaction?

Second, we organized a 2-day gathering, supported by SSHRC, the University of Windsor, Vancouver Island University, the University of Waterloo, and the Nicola Valley Institute of Technology. *Sharing Knowledge~Building Relationships: Aboriginal Experiences in the Cross-Cultural Workplace* was a knowledge-sharing event for over 100 attendees held June 7–8, 2016, at Vancouver Island University's Cowichan campus. The gathering brought together members of the Aboriginal community, academic researchers and human resource professionals (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal). The format of the symposium offered speaker presentations on topics to stimulate critical reflection, followed by small group sharing circles for discussions around the presented information. This methodology was designed to allow participants to work together to identify specific challenges that require further conversations; as well as highlighting best practices and training interventions to benefit Aboriginal workers and both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal employers. The intent was to integrate both a strengths-based approach to workplace experiences as well as storytelling as a means to convey the richness and variations of experiences of Indigenous employees.

## LOCATION FOR THE EVENT

Vancouver Island University, Cowichan Campus, was intentionally selected as the site for the gathering. The campus is uniquely responsive to Aboriginal principles. It was designed and constructed in consultation with local Aboriginal Nations; embodies the teachings of the Medicine Wheel; and prominently displays work (artistic and architectural) by numerous local artists, including many totems hand carved by Elder-in-Residence and master carver, *Yut'xwam* (Harold Joe, translated as “*Always Helping*”). We reached out to surrounding Aboriginal communities to engage their support for this event. Many organizations, municipalities and communities provided support in different ways, including sending letters of support for the event for the SSHRC funding application.

The Aboriginal Psychology Section of the Canadian Psychological Association (CPA) also provided its support for this event and publicized it to its members. We timed our gathering to facilitate attendance by members of the Aboriginal Section of CPA, or other conference attendees, as the annual Canadian Psychological Association meetings were held in nearby Victoria immediately following our event.

## EVENT ACTIVITIES

### Cultural Aspects of the Event

All aspects of the event (location, content, ways of sharing, etc.) were planned to respect Aboriginal culture and to reflect SSHRC's key concepts related to Aboriginal research: indigenous knowledge, reciprocity, community, and respect. The conference was attended and blessed by Elders of the Cowichan and Coast Salish Tribes, including VIU Cowichan Elders-in-Residence. Elders *Thiyyus* (Florence James, translated as “*Large Countenance of the Auras*”) and *Hwiem'* (Marlene Rice, translated as “*Story Teller*”) were a part of all activities during the gathering, and lent their wisdom to our discussions and interactions. The first day opened with a welcome and prayer by Coast Salish Elders Florence,

Marlene, and Harold. Elder Marlene invited participants to attend drumming and smudging on the roof the second day before the event activities began, and many attended. All of these activities enhanced the mindfulness of participants — mindfulness of place, time, and the reason for gathering. The conference was closed at the end of the second day by Elders of the Cowichan and Coast Salish Tribes.

Social interaction was encouraged. Meals were shared both days of the event, and informal coffee time was provided both mornings and afternoons to encourage interaction among participants. A cultural dinner was also an important part of the gathering. It was held at the Quw'utsun' Cultural & Conference Centre, where attendees also experienced traditional Coast Salish dances that told stories of Coast Salish history, as well as stories reflecting ways of knowing and being. The dancers gave a great gift to each person in attendance with the many dances they shared. The head dancer spoke to attendees emphasizing the meaning behind the songs and dances, as well as highlighting the connection between our gathering and the messages in the dances. He spoke of the importance of our gathering and our efforts to build relationships and share knowledge, and commended participants for their willingness to come from different walks of life, to come together in a good way, and to try to impart good on participants' various journeys.

## Presenters

Each day of the gathering was planned around a presentation in both morning and afternoon, followed by sharing circles related to the information in the presentations. In addition to the dances, the cultural dinner included a presentation related to Aboriginal employment in Canada. The presenters at the gathering came from a variety of backgrounds and shared a variety of information and perspectives related the topic of our gathering.

**Douglas S. White**, Director, Centre for Pre-Confederation Treaties & Reconciliation, Vancouver Island University, spoke on *Issues Facing Aboriginal Canadians in the Workplace*. His address highlighted the fact that the workplace is a context that helps people get to know themselves and, maybe more importantly each other, providing an arena where negative historically created stereotypes can be challenged. His address included a history and summary of treaties and legal processes and how these continue to impact how individuals interact with each other. Mr. White pointed out that work forms a part of an individual's self-identity, and therefore changes in work can effect changes in self-identity, and in the larger perspective, a change in workplaces can also effect a change in society.

**Dr. Wanda Wuttunee**, Professor, Department of Native Studies, University of Manitoba, spoke on *Identity and Cultural Alignment*. She focused her address on identity, balance and cultural alignment and shared how the cycle of belonging includes a sense of responsibility, identity, values, and peace. This was followed by a workshop where attendees were encouraged to explore their own identity and cultural alignment, both individually and with others.

**John Chenoweth**, Dean, Nicola Valley Institute of Technology delivered an address titled *Finding QWEMQW?MT — Balance and Regeneration*. He shared his research and vision and pointed out the need for students and employees to feel self-efficacy, and to have culture reflected in the education systems and in the

workplace. Mr. Chenoweth presented a model of the Cycle of Balance that involves open dialogue and opposition, reciprocally giving information to each other.

**Ken Tourand**, President, Nicola Valley Institute of Technology, talked about *Dispelling the Myths: Lessons Learned in the Cultural-Cultural Workplace*. Drawing on his experiences in an academic workplace, he talked about the need for bilateral inclusion — challenging discrimination and stereotypes from both sides. Mr. Tourand emphasized that both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal employees must equally work toward reducing stereotypes and discrimination, noting that Aboriginal institutions are also hesitant to hire non-Aboriginal employees. Reconciliation involves all parties being open to working together productively. In the workplace, it is important to recognize multiple cultures and to evince cultural understanding such as time off for cultural celebrations. According to Mr. Tourand, trust is the number one issue for Aboriginal people in the workplace.

**Kelly Lendsay**, President and CEO, Aboriginal Human Resource Council spoke on *Workplace Inclusion Leadership*, noting that there is an urgent need to tell stories of strong, economically successful Aboriginal people so Aboriginal youth can know their history and embrace the positive parts of their culture and of Aboriginal success. Mentorship can play a key role in this endeavour. Further, Mr. Lendsay discussed the fact that Aboriginal people have thousands of years of work experience, and mainstream organizations often model their business logos, mottos, and values off of the values held by Aboriginal people (bravery, honour, value, and virtue).

## Sharing Circles

Following the speaker addresses, participants broke out into small sharing circles of approximately 8–10 people to discuss topics related to the presentations. More specifically, the topics that were discussed were Aboriginal experiences at work, achieving balance, visions of an Aboriginal-Canadian workplace, and what future directions for collaboration and research would be most effective. The ideas brought up in each sharing circle were written down by “scribes” on large poster boards that could be seen by each member of the sharing circle. This increased visibility of responses and allowed participants to correct or clarify their responses if they wished. The scribes were university-aged youth from a diversity of cultural backgrounds. The sharing circle leaders were either members of local Aboriginal nations or members of the organizing team. The sharing circles provided an opportunity for the voices of every participant to be heard and a great deal of information was shared over the course of the event. After each sharing circle, we gathered as a large group and a designate from each sharing circle reported back to the whole group, providing one or two of the main ideas that emerged from the discussions. In addition, scribes posted their flip-chart pages in the area where we gathered for coffee breaks for people to read about the discussions in each sharing circle in more depth, and to offer the opportunity for continued informal discussions during the breaks. Posting the notes from each discussion was intended both to ensure transparency and to allow each participant to learn in greater depth the knowledge and information shared in each of the sharing circle discussions.

Several common themes across all sharing circles emerged in each discussion. Each sharing circle also had themes that emerged that represented ideas specific to that particular sharing circle.

**Sharing Circle 1.** *Diversity of Stories: Our Experiences at Work.* This discussion topic followed directly after Douglas White's address "Issues Facing Aboriginal Canadians in the Workplace" and generated a great diversity of stories. Participants told of the importance of relationships in work, and the impact on employees when meaningful relationships were not there. Relationships were discussed as important to obtaining jobs as well as problem-solving and understanding in the workplace. The importance of education and training (both pre-entry and on the job) was cited. A strong and recurring theme related to the need to balance traditional values with workplace expectations. People shared negative experiences of feeling marginalized in the workplace as well as positive experiences related to the expectations that with mutual effort the workplace can be a place of cultural safety for employees.

**Sharing Circle 2.** *Achieving Balance in a Give and Take World.* The discussion from this sharing circle flowed directly from Wanda Wuttunee's address "Identity and Cultural Alignment" as well as the discussions from the first Sharing Circle. A clear theme that emerged was that achieving balance is a team effort on the part of all involved — both in the workplace as well as outside the workplace (friends, families). It was highlighted that balance involves many arenas — health, family, social life, spiritual health, and taking time for self-care. Two types of "balance" emerged as particularly important in the discussions. The first type of balance noted was balance within an individual — being able to balance multiple identities, responsibilities and expectations. The second type of balance was that within an organization — workspaces where multiple identities are accepted, where family and cultural responsibilities are understood, and where space is provided for employees to balance those responsibilities. Balance was noted as something that is fluid and responsive rather than a static condition.

**Sharing Circle 3.** *Visions of an Aboriginal-Canadian Workplace.* John Chenoweth's address on "Finding QWEMQW?MT — Balance and Regeneration" set the stage for the third sharing circle. Participants talked about visions of an Aboriginal-Canadian workplace as one where there is teamwork, trust and inclusion. An Aboriginal-Canadian workplace was described as a place where each employee's identity is respected, and where employees model this respect and mentor new employees inclusively. Discussions about inclusivity explicitly brought in the ideas of dialogue and creating an understanding of different perspectives. Making a change toward an Aboriginal-Canadian workplace was talked about as a change toward balance, with the recognition that how to make such a change has no easy answers and involves self-sacrifice. It was noted that this balance must occur at several levels — within individual employees but also within the organization as a whole. An Aboriginal-Canadian workplace can only result if there is a focus on the larger picture of what holds organizations together as well as a focus on the individuals within that organization. This vision was described as one where the notion of "we help one another" is a way of life.

**Sharing Circle 4. *Where Do We Go from Here?*** Following the final address, where Ken Tourand spoke on “Dispelling the Myths: Lessons Learned in the Cross-Cultural Workplace,” participants shared their ideas on what the next steps should be toward creating workplaces with mutual respect, trust, and cultural safety. A strong theme of the need for connection with others emerged from the sharing circle discussions on the next steps. Attendees talked about the importance of identity and awareness, but also the importance of acknowledging individual gifts and strengths as well, highlighting the resilience in Aboriginal culture and communities. The value in hearing other people’s stories, learning from them, and celebrating others’ successes was stressed. Specifically, participants suggested that more support and mentorship programs in organizations would be beneficial. Such programs would serve to provide social support, as a means for understanding that “we are not in this alone,” and as a way to hear other people’s perspectives and experiences. This networking could provide a better understanding of barriers faced in the workplace, as well as connections to help overcome them.

Related to this, participants indicated that much more work toward integration in the workplace still remains, and that models of successful integration should be shared and built upon. Organizational cultures should be open to bringing various social cultural values and practices into the workplace, for example, providing the opportunity for Aboriginal individuals to take cultural leave for festivals and gatherings that may be unique to a local tribe or nation. The infrastructure for success and successful integration should be provided within communities to enable job seekers to access mentorship and networking even before organizational entry.

## **POST EVENT SUMMARY AND FEEDBACK**

After the gathering concluded, a summary of the discussions from the conference was sent to each participant in order to give each person an opportunity to make any corrections if required. In addition, attendees were asked to reflect on how the design and location of the event met the stated goals of the gathering. Roughly a quarter of attendees responded, with no corrections noted. The feedback was very positive, with all but one person indicating that they would definitely consider attending another event such as this one. A number of the respondents indicated that the presence and participation of the Elders-in-Residence was particularly important, with one participant adding that “they were valued and treasured for their wisdom.” Several respondents noted that the gathering was warm and welcoming. Many noted that the speakers’ topics were very interesting, the speakers themselves were knowledgeable, and the sharing was “excellent.” Another participant indicated that the notes taken at the gathering would be sent to a number of individuals who were not at the event as the material that was presented and covered was valuable. While respondents indicated that the cultural moments, the exercises, and the academic talks were appreciated, they also offered a number of suggestions for future events of this sort. Most notable among these was more of a presence of Aboriginal individuals in the non-academic workforce, as well as employers. The importance of also hearing from young Aboriginal employees with their stories of how they overcome obstacles in order to seek, gain, and retain employment was highlighted as well.

## CONCLUSION

The larger societal context, location, and activities of this event all contributed to the learning that took place. The reason for this gathering was rooted in societal issues, and stemmed from a desire on the part of both the organizing team and participants to share and gain knowledge about culture, values, and challenges for Aboriginal job seekers, employees, and organizations, and to build relationships to further exchange knowledge. The selection of the setting and the activities of the gathering were designed to respectfully draw on traditional connections with the earth and traditional ways of sharing knowledge. Vancouver Island University, Cowichan Campus was the physical location for the gathering, as it was designed to maximize its harmony with nature, to be responsive to Aboriginal principles of relation with nature, to create spaces filled with natural light and natural materials, and to be environmentally sustainable. Vancouver Island University, Cowichan Campus elders were in attendance, and not only opened and closed the event with prayers and song, but were an integral part of every aspect of the gathering, providing guidance throughout. Speakers provided information and frameworks which could be used in discussions, and the use of sharing circles as the discussion protocol provided each participant the opportunity to voice an opinion or a thought if s/he wished to do so. Knowledge from the sharing circles was made available to all attendees through brief reports and access to the scribes' notes. The cultural dinner and dances provided a vivid reminder of the place and time of the gathering, as well as the importance of understanding and respecting ways of knowing and being.

Much knowledge was shared during this event — from dyadic conversations between individuals, to informal group discussions, to formal sharing circles, to the presentations of speakers and dancers. Individuals who might not otherwise have had the opportunity to interact shared both their knowledges, and their ways of understanding. Thus, the participants, the place, and the time all came together to provide the specific context from which the knowledge was gathered and interpreted for the research reported elsewhere in this volume (Adair, Kwantes, Stonefish, Badea, & Weir, this volume) on culture, values, and challenges for Aboriginal employees in the current Canadian workplace.

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