

Seeking Ethical Space: Difficult Conversations and Learning Circles



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Context for Partnership between Indigenous & Northern communities

- History of colonization & differing worldviews = ‘silo’ effect
- 40,000 jobs lost in forestry sector
- Attiwapiskat housing and social crises
- Incarceration of 5 leaders from KI who objected to illegal trespass by mining companies
- Confronted with developments such as ‘Ring of Fire’, windfarms in ecologically sensitive areas, and hydroelectric dams
- Lack of access to policy/decision-makers – dividing communities both internally & externally

Some Participating Partners

- Northern Ontario Sustainable Communities Partnership – Community Forest Management
- Coalition for Algoma Passenger Trains – retaining and expanding passenger rail service
- Lake Superior Cultural Tourism Partnership
- Kashichiwan-Sipi (Albany River) Project
- 3 Northern universities (Lakehead, Laurentian & Algoma)

Research Question

How can diverse Northern and Indigenous communities and organizations create respectful spaces for regional planning, environmental stewardship and sustainable development?

Or: How can we cooperate to find mutually beneficial solutions to the multiple crises facing us?

Learning Circles

...small group dialogue which encourages people to speak from the heart in a spirit of inquiry....

- McBride & Gerow, 2009

Learning Circles at Algoma University

- First year courses in Community Economic and Social Development (CESD) accompanied by Learning Circles (1.5 hrs/wk, similar to a lab)
- Builds solidarity amongst students in an interdisciplinary program
- Build understanding between Indigenous students and allies through shared meaning making in discussions regarding critical community engagement & development in an era of globalization
- Initiated and led by Anishinaabe-kwe and Indigenous elders

Learning Circles as Research Methodology

- accompany participatory action research activities of partners
- open space for deliberative dialogue – focused, sometimes difficult conversations - and act as a tool for conflict resolution
- engage learners/researchers in exploring (mis)understandings, meaning-making, and generating new knowledge & understandings

Initial Outcomes

- Use of Treaty boundaries to identify research areas places researchers in Indigenous context
- Learning Circle provided forum for participating Chiefs to illustrate different understandings of ‘invitation’
- Communities have been able to identify learning objectives for courses specifically designed to meet their needs

‘Opening the Space’

- For respectful dialogue
- For asking questions
- For developing understanding of differing worldviews, sharing differing histories, cultures & contexts
- For discarding fears, and embracing new knowledges
- For building relationships