DIALOGUES BETWEEN FIRST NATIONS, URBAN ABORIGINALS AND IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES IN VANCOUVER

Baldwin Wong is the multicultural social planner at the City of Vancouver. He has been working on issues related to diversity, multiculturalism and immigration since the 1980s. In 2001, he launched the City's *Newcomer's Guide,* available in 5 languages. Since 2005, he has been the lead staff supporting the Mayor's Working Group on Immigration, which advised City Council on issues regarding immigrants and refugees. In 2009, he initiated the Vancouver Dialogues Project that aims to strengthen relations between First Nations and newcomer communities in Vancouver.

Karen Fong is the Project Coordinator for the Vancouver Dialogues Project. Prior to this position, she was a project manager in Aboriginal Health for the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority. Karen holds a Master of Science in Planning from the University of Toronto, with a focus on immigrants' integration in the labour market.

ABSTRACT

This article provides an overview of the Vancouver Dialogues Project, a collaborative project launched by the City of Vancouver to increase understanding and strengthen relations between the city's Aboriginal and immigrant communities. Initiated in 2010, the project undertook five key initiatives: dialogue circles, community research, cultural exchange visits, a program for youths and elders, and a neighborhood-based legacy project. Over two thousand people have participated in the project to date. Key legacies include a book and a video documenting the Dialogues process. Building on the momentum and success of Phase I, the project is currently in its second phase to implement ideas proposed by the participating communities.

INTRODUCTION

Vancouver is one of the most culturally diverse cities in the world. First Nations People have been living here for thousands of years. The city is within the traditional territory of the Coast Salish people, including the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh, who still live here today. They are thriving communities with unique, living cultures rich in heritage. Many Aboriginal People from other communities have also come here and now call Vancouver home, adding their experiences to the local cultural tapestry.

Vancouver continues to attract immigrants from diverse locations around the world. According to the 2006 Census data, close to half of Vancouver's population was born outside of Canada.

Over the years, First Nations, urban Aboriginal groups and immigrant organizations have acknowledged that there is limited intercultural interaction between Aboriginal and immigrant Canadians. Within Aboriginal communities, there is a sense that their history, culture and heritage are not well understood by others living within their traditional territory. For newcomers, it seems there are few opportunities to learn about the Aboriginal community living in their midst. A key goal of the Vancouver Dialogues Project is to help bridge the information and communication gaps between these communities.

In an effort to promote increased understanding and strengthen relationships between Aboriginal and immigrant communities, the City of Vancouver initiated a project called Dialogues between First Nations, Urban Aboriginal and Immigrant Communities in Vancouver (otherwise known as the Vancouver Dialogues Project). The project was implemented by the City in collaboration with twenty-seven community partners. The project is supported by Vancouver City Council and received funding from the Province of British Columbia.

The Dialogues Project Phase I began in January 2010. A launch event attended by over two hundred guests was held at the First Nations Longhouse at UBC. Representatives from City Council, local First Nations, urban Aboriginal and

other stakeholders gave greetings. A special performance was commissioned for the occasion.

Phase II commenced in September 2011 and will conclude in August 2012. Over two thousand people have participated in the project to date.

The Project co-chairs are Wade Grant from the Musqueam Nation, Susan Tatoosh from the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre and Professor Henry Yu of UBC. They provide strong leadership and vision to the project with the support of the Project Steering Group.

PHASE I – FIVE KEY INITIATIVES

Phase I of the project focused on five key initiatives: dialogue circles, community research, cultural exchange visits, a program for youths and elders, and a neighbourhood based storytelling project.

1. Dialogue Circles

As one of the key opportunities for community members to engage with each other, the dialogue circles became a fundamental part of the project. Dialogue circles are spaces created for ten to fifteen participants to share stories, experiences and perspectives in an intimate setting. Nine different dialogue circles were held at various locations throughout the city. Two of the circles were youth specific. Each group met a minimum of three times and the discussion, guided by a skilled facilitator, focused on remembering the past, sharing current issues and initiatives, and envisioning strategies for future collaborations.

Altogether, 123 individuals participated in the nine circles. All participants generously shared their perspectives and some shared deeply personal stories. While each person's story was unique, some common themes emerged. The desire to seek understanding resonated among many participants, particularly from the immigrant participants. Many noted that the complex colonization history of Aboriginal communities and their current realities are not well understood by society at large, and stereotypes about Aboriginal communities abound. Aboriginal participants lamented this lack of understanding and misrepresentation.

"Through the mass media, First Nations are always shown to have problems… the media projects an image that isn't very healthy." – Dialogue circle participant

Alongside the theme of seeking understanding was the related theme of learning. Many immigrant participants recounted stories of how, through their own efforts or through interactions with Aboriginal people, they discovered more about the histories, experiences and perspectives of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada. For many, there was a particular story around their "a-ha" moment when their understanding began to shift and deepen.

The experience of racism was another commonly shared story. For many, being the subject of racial stereotypes was due to a lack of understanding by others. For others, race-based inequality and discrimination was more of a systemic problem, rooted in historical processes of domination and unfair treatment.

Many Aboriginal participants talked about land and belonging; reconciliation and healing were significant aspects of their stories. Some Coast Salish elders told stories of their communities' historical presence on the land and how they had seen the city change over the years. Almost universally, their ties to their land and communities were altered through colonization. Many were of the opinion that the reconciliation and healing process not only affected them, but also future generations.

Other stories and themes came out of the dialogue circles. Identity, language and culture were all significant topics for many participants. Over time, a bond of trust and communication developed between circle participants.

At the end of the circles, participants from all nine groups gathered for a large closing circle to meet one another and discuss the issues that had been raised in individual circles. Participants shared their ideas for promoting stronger relationship building between Aboriginal and immigrant communities. Other ideas included the need for schools to incorporate more accurate and in-depth content on Aboriginal and immigrant communities into classrooms; the importance of investing in intercultural exchange opportunities; and the telling and preserving of stories and oral histories through artistic projects or creative media.

The closing dialogue circle attracted the attendance of former governor general Adrienne Clarkson and well-known author/philosopher John Ralston Saul. Madame Clarkson and Mr. Saul both reiterated the importance for newcomers to learn about Aboriginal history and culture and to build stronger relationships between newcomers and the original inhabitants of this land.

2. Community Research

In an effort to gather current information about issues of interest, the project undertook four research initiatives: a community survey, a literature review, interviews with key community members, and the commissioning of a report on Vancouver's urban Aboriginal communities:

a) An online survey gathered opinions and experiences from Aboriginals and immigrants. The survey received 500 responses, of which about one-fifth were Aboriginal. Overall, respondents showed a very positive view of Vancouver as a welcoming city. There were some shared experiences between Aboriginal and immigrant

communities, such as discrimination, loss of tradition and language, and barriers to accessing social goods, such as housing and employment. Suggestions for further work included: anti-racism initiatives, jointly-hosted community celebratory events and youth engagement activities.

b) A literature review uncovered what information regarding Aboriginal communities is available to newcomers. While some information exists, much of it does not target newcomers. Government information intended for newcomer orientation generally contains very limited information about Aboriginal Peoples. This is a gap that needs to be addressed if newcomers are to be better informed about First Nations in Canada.

c) Ten individuals with varied and rich life experiences were interviewed about their experiences and perceptions of social inclusion and intercultural relations. All of the participants shared their unique stories, and many of them had common experiences of exclusion, racism, loss of language and culture, and efforts to reach out to other communities. They were also hopeful that positive change is possible. Their stories were collected and published in the Vancouver Dialogues book.

d) The commissioned report, *Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study: Vancouver Report* presents findings based on interviews with local Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal residents of Vancouver. It was part of a nationwide research project on the urban Aboriginal population, conducted by the Environics Institute.

3. Cultural Exchange Visits

Twelve cultural exchange visits were held among First Nations, urban Aboriginal and immigrant communities. In face-to-face meetings at various venues or sites, community members had the opportunity to learn more about the host communities, hear their stories and engage in dialogue.

Diverse community partners co-hosted these visits with the Dialogues Project. The Musqueam and Tsleil-Waututh Nations hosted visits on their reserves, sharing stories of their history and visions of the future. For many participants, this was their first time in a First Nations community.

The Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre and Native Education College, both urban Aboriginal organizations, opened their doors to welcome visitors and talk about their work and the communities they serve. The UBC First Nations Longhouse and Museum of Anthropology co-hosted a visit, underlining Aboriginal knowledge and culture.

From the immigrant communities, the Ismaili, Jewish and Chinese communities each hosted a visit, sharing aspects of their community history, culture and faith. Other visits, organized by the project's youth community developers included an exchange between Aboriginal and Mayan communities, a cooking exchange between Aboriginal and Afghan women, a traditional healing practice dialogue and a youth bus tour to visit with various youth-serving community organizations.

A great deal of learning took place during these cultural exchange visits. Host presenters were very open about their communities. Aboriginal hosts talked about their ancestors and legends, inviting participants to take part in their ceremonies and songs. Immigrant hosts invited guests to visit special places of worship and gathering. All of the hosts shared their wealth of knowledge and insights about their communities, and participants were welcome to engage in dialogues and share their perspectives.

Professor Linc Kesler of UBC First Nations House of Learning made the following comment after attending a number of cultural exchange visits: "People have had the chance to directly experience each other's circumstances and understand the complexity of the forces that have shaped them; and that is a very valuable foundation upon which to build further, lasting relationships."

4. Youth and Elders Program

Elders and seniors from Aboriginal and immigrant communities were invited to take part in discussions around issues of interest, particularly around intercultural and intergenerational relations. They talked about their desire to connect with and support the youth in their communities, as well as common issues of concern, such as access to health, housing and transportation services, and experiences with discrimination in their lives.

Youth were also invited to take part in workshops and discussions. They talked about issues of power and privilege and ways of bridging group divides.

Youth and elders were then brought together to take part in a photography workshop in preparation for PhotoVoice projects. PhotoVoice combines photography with narrative to convey a particular message. Small groups of youth and elders jointly came up with themes for their PhotoVoice projects. Their photos and accompanying narratives were unveiled at a special event in the summer of 2011.

An Elder who participated in the PhotoVoice project made the following comment: "It's so important to let the young people know that we love them. We want to share what we can to help them lead a good life. We need to listen to them."

5. Legacy Project

A neighbourhood-based legacy project called *Our Roots* was carried out in Vancouver's Grandview-Woodlands area. Its main goal was to collect stories from Aboriginal and immigrant residents. Interviews were conducted with seventeen community members who lived or worked in the neighbourhood. Poster boards were created and displayed at a Storytelling Festival, which commemorated the City's 125th anniversary.

One Aboriginal resident who participated in the story-gathering project said the following: "The [Aboriginal Friendship Centre] means a lot to me because I have so many different friends here now. I get really lonely sitting at home all by myself. People from all different places come here: Métis people, Cree people, and people from all up and down the coast. It just seemed like I fit right in and started doing everything that I'm doing right now."

CELEBRATING AND SHARING STORIES

On July 5th, 2011, towards the end of Phase I of the Dialogues Project, a special event was held to bring together participants and partners to celebrate the initiatives and achievements of the project. Multimedia installations and a multi-artist performance were created specifically for the event to showcase the initiatives and spirit of the project.

Also included in the event was the launch of the project's book, *Vancouver Dialogues: First Nations, Urban Aboriginal and Immigrant Communities,* and the premiere screening of the project's video, *Sharing Our Stories: The Vancouver Dialogues Project.* The book and video highlight the initiatives and achievements of the project and are legacies intended to communicate the stories and connections that have taken place, encouraging broader public engagement in these issues.

CONTINUING DIALOGUE

Key project learning so far can be gleaned from an evaluation completed by the Social Planning and Research Council of BC (SPARC BC). The evaluation identified that there was a demand for initiatives that provide different communities with meaningful opportunities to interact and learn from one another. Project participants appreciated the openness and respect in how participants shared their stories and the opportunity to visit diverse communities in their unique settings.

Many participants also spoke about the need for education about the historical and present day realities faced by First Nations and urban Aboriginal communities of Canada. Greater emphasis needs to be placed on educating newcomers, as well as society at large.

Project participants felt that intercultural exchange through arts and cultural activities were good avenues to engage communities and promote understanding.

The Vancouver Dialogues Project has demonstrated that many are eager to learn more about the diversity of communities in Vancouver. Given the opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue, through on-site visits and face-to-face dialogue, many will deepen their understanding of Aboriginal and immigrant communities. The project was an invitation to begin this process of connection and relationship building.

VANCOUVER DIALOGUES PROJECT - PHASE II

Building on the experiences from Phase I, Phase II of the project (Sept 2011-Aug 2012) will continue to engage First Nations, urban Aboriginal and immigrant communities through initiatives, such as: exploring ways of bringing accessible information about Aboriginal communities to newcomer communities; exploring strategies for the City to promote stronger relationship building between Aboriginal and newcomer communities; engaging youth through a series of dialogues and a citywide forum; and furthering cultural exchange visits.

For more information, please contact Baldwin Wong, Project Lead, at: baldwin.wong@vancouver.ca or visit the Project's website: www.vancouver.ca/dialoguesproject

APPENDIX

PROJECT PARTNERS

The Dialogues Project is guided by a Project Steering Group consisting of members from local First Nations, Aboriginal organizations, immigrant-serving organizations, neighbourhood houses, and other stakeholder groups.

Project co-chairs:

- Wade Grant, Musqueam Council member
- Susan Tatoosh, Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre
- Professor Henry Yu, UBC Department of History

Project Steering Group:

- Affiliation of Multicultural Societies and Service Agencies of BC (AMSSA)
- City of Vancouver, Hastings Institute
- City of Vancouver, Mayor's Working Group on Immigration
- Civic Education Society
- Downtown Eastside Women's Centre
- Immigrant Services Society of BC

- Institute for Canadian Citizenship
- Kiwassa Neighbourhood House
- Laurier Institution
- MOSAIC
- Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House
- Musqueam First Nation
- Native Education College
- Squamish First Nation
- S.U.C.C.E.S.S.
- Tsleil-Waututh First Nation
- UBC Department of History
- UBC First Nations House of Learning
- UBC Irving K. Barber Learning Centre
- UBC Museum of Anthropology
- UBC Office of Community Affairs
- UBC School of Social Work
- Urban Native Youth Association
- Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre
- Vancouver Community College
- Vancouver Métis Community Association
- Vancouver Public Library

Sharing Our Stories

In 2010, a groundbreaking cross-cultural project was launched. The Vancouver Dialogues Project created many ways for Aboriginal and immigrant communities to gather together in dialogue and cultural sharing. Set amidst the stunning landscape of Vancouver Coast Salish traditional territory, *Sharing Our Stories* captures the personal reflections of some very thoughtful project participants, including Aboriginal elders and leaders Larry Grant, Leah George-Wilson and Marjorie White, as well as public figures John Ralston Saul and former Governor General Adrienne Clarkson. The video celebrates the achievements of the project, while showcasing some of the diverse events and collaborations that took place. It is an inspiring tool for those wishing to engage in cross-cultural work and dialogue.

Produced by the City of Vancouver and Indigenous City Productions
Written and directed by Kamala Todd
Camera by Mike McKinlay
Sound by Sandor Gyurkovics
Edited by Shirley Anne Claydon and Joah Lui

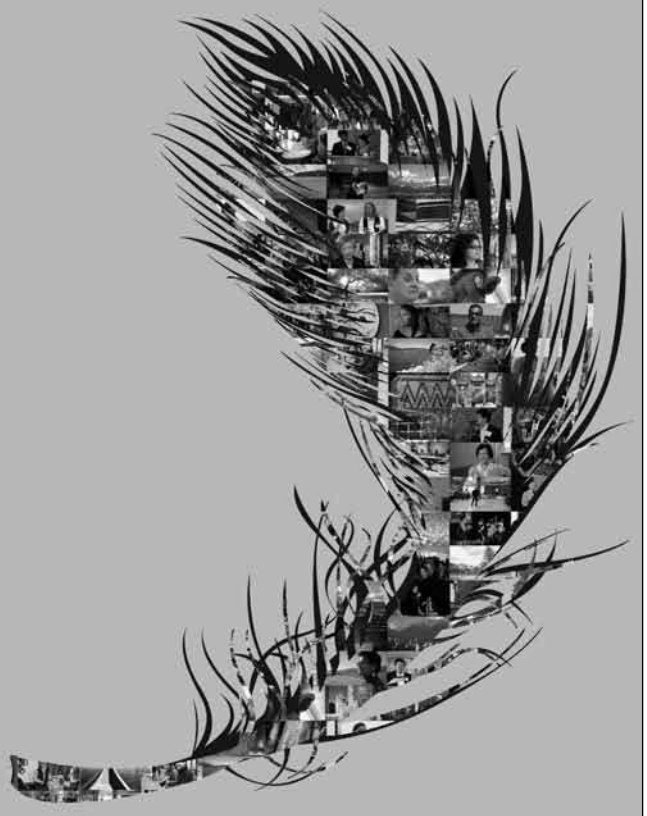
The Vancouver Dialogues Project is convened by the City of Vancouver, in collaboration with diverse community partners. Project coordination is provided by Social Policy, Community Services Group, City of Vancouver.

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Sharing Our Stories
The Vancouver Dialogues Project



DVD
26 minutes