New Perspectives on Learning in the DTES

A Community-University Conference
May 3-4, 2016

SUMMARY REPORT

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As part of the UBC centennial celebrations, the UBC Learning Exchange organized a two-day conference at the Japanese Language School in the heart of the Downtown Eastside to promote dialogue between diverse groups of people, to facilitate new community-university collaborations around innovative learning and to model the Learning Exchange’s philosophy of community engagement. Bringing together 354 people from across the sectors - both within the community and the university - the conference was an opportunity to share, reflect on, and experience novel approaches to learning, which are rooted in the neighbourhood.

Community members, community organizations, university faculty, staff & students exchanged their learning through 26 different scheduled sessions and 7 drop-in activities organized around the following themes:

A. Hot topics in the DTES
B. Innovative approaches to evaluation & knowledge exchange
C. Student experiential learning
D. Arts & culture

With every session mirroring the work of the UBC Learning Exchange in some capacity, the conference was an extension and showcase of the reciprocal learning and asset-based approach the Learning Exchange facilitates everyday.

CONFERENCE DISTINGUISHING FEATURES

Dialogue within diversity

The unique mix of people (approximately 50/50 split between community and university) was appreciated and brought “a lot of different voices.”

“EVERYONE WAS PARTICIPATING AS EQUALS AND NO ONE VOICE WAS OVERVALUED.”

Place-based learning exchanges

Situating the conference in the DTES was a way to honour the knowledge in the community and promote dialogue from an asset-based standpoint.

Several session facilitators commented that the premise of the conference as an exchange of learning helped them to focus on the people in the room in their preparation. This shift in focus had a humanizing effect and prompted greater thoughtfulness and humility. One person reflected that their posture in coming to the conference was one of learning.

Accessible excellence

“In this was a low barrier conference in every way,” commented a community partner.

Innovative methods, interesting approaches and inductive learning opportunities were presented in a way that was accessibly unpolished and refreshingly un-intimidating. Everyone’s learning was valuable, and space was created for all the voices to be heard. An inclusive community was built whether people had been to a hundred conferences or none.

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**Conference Legacy**

**For Future Projects/Ideas**

The conference lives on by informing the work of the UBC Learning Exchange and its collaborators.

> **through community engagement**

Inspired by the conference, DTES residents advocated for a project to bring an Indigenous Elder’s story to light at a workshop in the new year.

The Learning Exchange and a new community partner are working to pilot a human library project this fall.

New relationships were established between students and the Faculty of Education to work on a digital literacy project of interest to DTES residents.

SHHS (Student Housing & Hospitality Services), who provided all the healthy and delicious food, is exploring a reciprocal partnership with local organizations to train community residents in hospitality.

> **through student learning**

The study conducted by students at the conference to understand how residents picture health in the neighbourhood is directly informing Learning Exchange programming.

The conference gave students opportunity to present their work and connect with one another across disciplines. Some continue to inform each other’s research projects.

> **through research excellence**

The future and direction of the Making Research Accessible initiative was informed by a session at the conference on community-based research.

Faculty were excited by the theatre-based research methodologies displayed in the *Voices Up* performance and invited the cast to be involved in a national conference next year.

Faculty members were inspired to publish the interesting methodologies used in a session to explore alternative economic futures.

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**For Participants**

A selection of participants were interviewed following the conference about its legacy moving forward.

**Breaking Down Stereotypes**

The conference helped to break down stereotypes, whether toward the DTES or toward the university community.

Many people previously unfamiliar with the DTES became motivated to challenge the stereotypes and stigmatization of the DTES after witnessing the knowledge, caring, and empowerment of the DTES community.

Others, who expected to experience snobbery from the university crowd, were surprised to find reason to change their mind about the university after numerous positive interactions.

**Asking New Questions**

The conference served as a catalyst for some people to ask new questions of relevance to their area. Questions such as, “How can I facilitate an un-patronizing way for Indigenous people to preserve their own language?” Or “How can we try to get more community residents involved to drive more participatory action?” Or “Does the research actually benefit the people who need the help?” Such questioning may be indicative of a deeper shift happening in their thought processes.

**Reflecting on Practice**

For some this was an opportunity to reflect on their own practice, whether immediately as in the case of one student incorporating culture into their presentation or subsequently to rethink what aspects a research project was looking at and what pieces were they missing.

For more information, please contact the UBC Learning Exchange’s Academic Director:

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