

# First Nations, Inuit and Métis Essential Skills Inventory Project (FIMESIP)

## Case Study:

**Stepping Stones: Certificate in Community Capacity Building for Rural and Remote Communities**

*Simon Fraser University*



**Canada**

This project is funded by the  
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of Literacy and Essential Skills



## About the First Nations, Inuit and Métis Essential Skills Inventory Project (FIMESIP)

The Canadian Career Development Foundation (CCDF) in partnership with Employment and Social Development Canada's Office of Literacy and Essential Skills, the Assembly of First Nations, the Métis National Council and the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami developed a comprehensive inventory of Essential Skills initiatives aimed at First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. The *First Nations, Inuit and Métis ES Inventory Project's (FIMESIP)* goal is to better understand the state of practice with respect to Essential Skills initiatives tailored to First Nations, Inuit and Métis youth and adults living in diverse communities throughout Canada and to share these insights and lessons learned with a larger community of practice. Through FIMESIP, we have identified factors ("markers" of promising practice) that contribute to the initiatives success. **The markers, inventory, case studies and evaluation toolkit are available at: [www.fimesip.ca](http://www.fimesip.ca).**

CCDF gratefully acknowledges the support of the Steering Committee and Working Group of FIMESIP:

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### FIMESIP Case Study: Stepping Stones: Certificate in Community Capacity Building for Rural and Remote Communities, Simon Fraser University, N'Quatqua, Q'aLaTKu7eM, Sts'ailes and Soowahlie, First Nations Communities British Columbia

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## Overview

Stepping Stones was developed as part of a three-year project of the Community Education Program and 7th Floor Media Group at Simon Fraser University (SFU), funded by the Government of Canada's Office of Literacy and Essential Skills. The program evolved out of close partnerships with Lower Stl'atl'imx Tribal Council and Stó:Lō Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training (ASET), Decoda Literacy Solutions, BC Campus and Aboriginal consultants who acted as the project's Advisory Committee and provide ongoing support.

The Stepping Stones Project developed and piloted a Certificate in Community Capacity Building delivered in partnership with rural/remote Aboriginal communities across British Columbia and the Community Education Program in the Lifelong Learning Department at Simon Fraser University (SFU). The free Community Capacity Building Certificate Program was delivered as a part-time program over 6 months both online and on-site in four collaborating rural/remote First Nations Communities: N'Quatqua, Q'aLaTKu7eM<sup>1</sup>, Sts'ailes and Soowahlie. It is a holistic, culturally relevant, literacy and Essential Skills (ES) program designed to help First Nations community members realize their personal and community capacity building goals. It addresses community needs and affirms Aboriginal cultures, perspectives and approaches to learning.

Stepping Stones is designed to help people to identify, plan out, implement and then evaluate a small community project that advances the larger and longer-term community vision or goal through targeted action. Through the process, the ES of Aboriginal adults living in rural/remote settings are enhanced, enabling them to succeed in a post-secondary education context, progress towards training and employment and more fully contribute to the development of their communities.

The program is primarily experiential and follows a belief that people learn best by doing something about which they feel passionately (i.e. the development of their communities). SFU Community Education Program staff met with each host community and, through face-to-face consultations with community members, supported them in crafting a long-term vision for the development of the community. Once a vision was created, the participants in the certificate program identified, planned, implemented and evaluated a smaller project that would

be a “stepping stone” towards realizing their community's larger vision.

A total of 35 learners began the program and 27 graduated with their Certificate in Community Capacity Building. Some of the key elements that account for the success and effectiveness of the program are:

- Relationship building and creating authentic First Nations-university partnerships;
- Flexible curriculum framework;
- Indigenous-based curriculum
- Seamless embedding of ES;
- Blended delivery method using online and community-based learning.
- Adherence to Indigenous evaluation protocols (**O**wnership, **C**ontrol, **A**ccess and **P**ossession—OCAP).

## Essential Skills Focus

All nine of the [ES](#) were seamlessly woven into course topic areas and related activities. An emphasis was placed on the ES needed: 1) to successfully complete a community project using a step-by-step community development process; and 2) to empower participants to affect positive change in their community. Learners acquired and applied the ES associated with performing tasks such as research, goal setting, project planning and implementation, building community engagement, event organizing, interviewing community members, giving community presentations, proposal writing and budget preparation.

## Objectives

The main goal of the program is to increase the ES of Aboriginal adults living in rural/remote settings in order for them to succeed in training, post-secondary education and their careers and to foster the confidence and personal empowerment needed to more fully contribute to their communities. In order to achieve these goals, the program aimed at strengthening participants' ES, providing learners with transferrable skills needed for work and school and creating strong relationships between the learners and their community.

<sup>1</sup> Q'aLaTKu7eM is the name of the community location. The program was developed in collaboration with Samahquam First Nations.

A secondary goal of the project was to help participants understand the power of ES to open doors in their lives and careers and to exercise their rights, both as individuals and as indigenous persons.

## Promising Practice (Keys to Success)

### *Methodology/Approach*

Stepping Stones was built upon a foundation of SFU's knowledge and prior experience with implementing Aboriginal programs and building partnerships and collaborating with First Nations communities.

The program was expanded by 18 months in order to take sufficient time to build trusting working relationships and implement a consultation process with each of the four First Nations community partners. In the development of Stepping Stones, SFU staff met with community members through "open circle" meetings where the co-creation of the program took shape. The communities worked with SFU to determine what they wanted SFU to do.

Originally, the Community Education Program Department had thought that they would offer the communities an Aboriginal Bridging or Pre-University Preparation program that would be delivered on-line and in the community. Through the consultations, SFU realized that communities neither wanted nor needed this type of program. Given that Stepping Stones was an ES program, the communities wanted it to meet the needs of those community members "who were lacking confidence, needed to be inspired and to recognize the strengths they had but didn't believe they had," states Judy Smith, Director of Community Education Programs Stepping Stones Project Director. They wanted these people to be engaged and to participate more actively in their community and "do the community work that needed to be done." The communities determined that they wanted community members to gain the skills required for community building and outlined how best to achieve the learning.

SFU staff realized that what the community was asking for was a Community Capacity Building (CCB) program. The task then became how to communicate what a CCB program could provide to meet this identified need and how to inspire community members to imagine themselves being in the program. SFU

decided that perhaps the best approach would be to use an indigenous learning method, namely story-telling. SFU visited the communities again using traditional storytelling methods. They employed metaphor and visuals to introduce the program: with the land symbolizing community, the river and the stepping stones symbolizing the learning journey and light symbolizing the goals and vision. The response from the community after the story was told was extremely positive. Smith remembers a wonderful moment after her storytelling presentation when an Elder who had been present at a number of consultations declared, "Now I get it!"

These consultations also helped in the co-development of the program curriculum. Smith states, "We also tested the curriculum as we went along, as it was being developed." Testing the curriculum with the community served a dual purpose. Trying out an exercise like asset mapping with the community helped community members to articulate their longer term community goals and project areas. This, in turn, helped participants in coming up with community projects that would help build towards the community's vision. The Soowahlie Community, for example, wanted to see some steps taken towards building a cultural centre by finding simple ways for the community to come together to share traditions and culture. Participants in the Soowahlie CCB Certificate Program decided to build a playground as a first step towards their community's vision.

It was through this "grass-roots" approach of community consultations that the Stepping Stones Program was co-developed and affirmed that Stepping Stones would truly meet the needs of First Nations communities.

### *Structure of the Program*

Stepping Stones' educational framework is based on the interconnectedness of support and knowledge exchange between all those involved and touched by the program. As such, Stepping Stones took place on-site in the community at a community learning centre. Program personnel included SFU Instructors, as well as community-based staff: an on-site Tutor-Mentor and a Community Program Coordinator. Everyone in the community including Elders, the Band Managers, family members and other learners, had a part to play in contributing to the learning experience and expanding the participants' learning environment.

***“The program is set up to explore [learners] own community... [Learners] were able to connect with local family and Elders.”***

Tutor-Mentor, Soowahlie Community<sup>2</sup>

Participants in Stepping Stones were community members with a Grade 10 education whose literacy and ES levels make it difficult to access education and employment and who expressed a strong commitment to the program, learning and their community. One community member stated they “... wanted to engage young people who were unemployed and needed and wanted to do something useful with their time.”

While the program was known to the community through the community consultations, key community members and the Community Coordinators did further outreach to help “get the word out” and recruit potential participants. Those interested in attending the Certificate Program were asked to submit an application with a letter outlining why they wanted to be involved. They were subsequently interviewed and, if they met the Program’s criteria, they were invited to join.

Smith states that “...many learning programs targeting First Nations people are short term (4-6 weeks) and, while valuable, they often have limited results leaving people in what our colleague calls ‘Learning Purgatory’.” Learners finish the program without enough experience or credentials to move forward with their goals, which leaves learners frustrated and disappointed. Stepping Stones is structured to be a comprehensive program that results in a recognized university non-credit credential.

Eight to 10 participants per intake completed 196 direct instructional hours using a blended learning model (face-to face and on-line) and committed to 12 hours per week for six months; eight hours per week at their community learning centre and four hours per week completing assignments and projects online. Learners worked individually and as a learning-circle group. Participants also met one-on-one with the on-site instructional staff. Learners who successfully completed the program earned a non-credit SFU Certificate in Community Capacity Building.

***“Stepping Stones provides learners with the experience and knowledge to take the next steps in their learning journey, towards employment, toward doing community work, or whatever that next step may be.”***

Judy Smith

## **Content of the Program**

The Stepping Stones Community Capacity Building curriculum is based on the principles of:

- Indigenous Learning: emphasizing holistic, experiential learning and learning from Elders; and,
- Popular Education: emphasizing reciprocal and community learning.

The program includes 6 courses:

1. Foundational Skills for Project Planning
2. Community-Based Project Planning
3. Foundational Skills for Project Implementation
4. Community-Based Project Implementation
5. Evaluation of Community-Based Projects
6. Individual Learning

At the centre of the curriculum is the community development project, defined by the participants and carried throughout the program. Curriculum activities are hands-on and provide authentic learning opportunities directly associated with a step-by-step community building process. Participants learn through research and writing assignments, oral presentations, reflection exercises and outreach activities in their communities. They learn the necessity of working together with their fellow participants and with other community members in order to complete their project.

As part of the community building process, learners needed to gather information from the community and ensure community engagement. This took the form of organizing and hosting community events. The Soowahlie program participants planned and hosted a community dinner. During the gathering, they shared their idea of building a playground, presented the research they had done and gathered input from the community on how to proceed. They shared with the community what they had learned and their own personal growth through the program. “During the event, learners had an opportunity to present to the community and let them know what they were doing and what they were working on. This was a huge deal ..... to stand up in front of [the community] and to share their work and to practice their ES,” Soowahlie Tutor-Mentor.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Simon Fraser University, Continuing Studies, Community Education Program "Tutor- Mentor Curriculum Input Questions". Questionnaire. pg.2. Print. (2012).

<sup>3</sup> Simon Fraser University, Continuing Studies, Community Education Program "Tutor- Mentor Curriculum Input Questions". Questionnaire. pgs. 2-3. Print. (2012).

Cultural relevancy is an essential component of the program and, accordingly, the curriculum integrates applicable topics as well as indigenous ways of learning. The curriculum is flexible and creates space for individuals and communities to infuse their own cultures, values, principles and traditions. Students learn about their land, their community, their families and themselves through course activities such as community interviews, reflective exercises and asset mapping.

Lessons include “Valuing Current Historical Realities” where participants learn about their history as a people and as a community and make connections to their present and their future. Elders teach traditional cultural protocols practiced during community events and ceremonies and support participants in understanding the community-building purpose behind the procedures involved in hosting these events and participating in these ceremonies. Many activities in the program use the Medicine Wheel. In the Soowahlie program, learners used the Medicine Wheel to reflect on where they were at in their lives spiritually, mentally, emotionally, and physically.

***“The traditional way of life for Indigenous (people) has been lost in many communities’ lives and Stepping Stones has helped restore a collective identity process that sees the land as an asset, the self as an integral part of the community and the community as a whole,”***

Tutor-Mentor of the Stepping Stones project.<sup>4</sup>

### **Delivery of the Program**

Stepping Stones is a community-based and learner-centred program. Instructional staff, community members and participants all identified having the program in the community as key to participant success. Participants living in rural/remote locations have difficulty accessing transportation and other support services required when attending training. Having the program in their community provided learners with the supports and resources they needed to sustain their commitment and participation.

The Community Coordinator provided logistical and personal support, including classroom set up and maintenance, recruitment, one-on-one encouragement, a meal on class days,

child-minding and transportation. The community-based Tutor-Mentor provided group and individual learning support by guiding learners through class activities and the online curriculum. An SFU Instructor provided feedback and support to learners through a variety of online forums. Learners had access to the knowledge and skills of Elders and other key members in the community. As a result of being a community-based program, learners’ families and friends were more aware of what was happening in the learner’s life helping to create accountability and another circle of encouragement.

As a learner-centred program, Stepping Stones recognizes learner strengths and values diverse learning styles. The Instructor, while honouring the core vision and learning objectives of the program, adapted the curriculum in response to learners’ needs. Lessons and assignments were presented in a variety of forms such as: writing, reading, listening and sharing ideas, watching and discussing videos, working with mixed media, engaging in group discussions and physical activity. Learners can choose the form of assignment that inspires them and works best with their personal learning style.

Online instructional techniques also reflected a learner-centred approach. The online Instructor visited each community and met face-to-face with the participants. This was seen as essential to building the rapport need to create an online community of learning and increase participants’ comfort levels. Leanne Boschman, the online instructor commented that, “... it takes time for an instructor and a learner to get to know one another and build an authentic relationship. It is important to begin slowly so as not to overwhelm learners, many of whom may not be familiar with distance learning or have limited computer skills. The instructor’s responses should match the style being presented by the participants, taking cues from the length and content of the learner’s postings. Writing is not edited for grammar or spelling unless requested; rather instructional comments take the form of questions. The online curriculum is further enriched with visuals, photographs and humour.”

Stepping Stones requires the Instructor to hold a minimum of a Master’s degree, have experience working with Aboriginal communities and a strong understanding of First Nations history and cultures. The Instructor needs experience and training in adult education approaches and online instructional techniques. Experience in community capacity building and/or community project work experience are considered important assets to the position.

<sup>4</sup> Simon Fraser University, Continuing Studies, Community Education Program “Tutor- Mentor Curriculum Input Questions”. Questionnaire. pg. 6 Print. (2012).

Community Tutor-Mentors are also required to have experience working with Aboriginal communities, a strong understanding of First Nations history and cultures and, preferably, a strong connection to the community in which they are working. They typically have experience and training in delivering adult education, tutoring and ES training. In addition, the Tutor-Mentor must be able to facilitate group discussions and experience in community capacity building is considered an asset.

Stepping Stones also involves the Community Coordinators, Elders and Community Champions such as Band Managers and Chiefs. These community members play a pivotal role in the program. They are members of the community, know it intimately, hold its history and traditions and are positioned to play a supportive role to the participants.

## Outcomes of the Program

An evaluation strategy was established at the beginning of the program using a logic model framework. The logic model outlines:

- The guiding principles of the program;
- The activities, outputs, and outcomes (immediate, intermediate and long-term) for each of the three major program areas: Literacy and ES, Community Capacity Building and Aboriginal Ways of Knowing; and,
- The ultimate impact of the program.

There were a range of methods used to assess program outcomes. Learners' progress was tracked through attendance, feedback from instructional staff on group and individual assignments, and the implementation and evaluation of their community project. Participants kept learning journals and provided testimonials related to personal stories of change.

Community consultations continued throughout the program and interviews and surveys were done with key stakeholders including community members, instructional staff and learners.

Of the 35 participants who began the program 27 completed, earning their Community Capacity Building Certificate. Twelve participants were either employed or pursuing further training.

Based on the recorded observations of community staff and the feedback of participants, the program had a profound impact on the learners. Participants have increased knowledge of their own skills, grown in confidence and are actively participating in the community. Chief of the Soowahlie Nation, Brenda Wallace, reported that the participants of the program continue meeting a

year after graduation and still call themselves the "Stepping Stones" group. "After one year, they are still ready and willing to be involved. They are our 'go to group' in the community now. They come to community meetings and speak up," says Wallace.

Marcella Commodore, Soowahlie Community Coordinator observed how participants hold themselves differently and have come out of their shell. "At the graduation ceremony, people were in tears just to see how far they [participants] had come."

Participants spoke to their sense of accomplishment in being able to contribute to and help their community. They expressed their desire to expand on their community project and "do more". One participant stated, "We want a bigger project...another program, a Stepping Stones 2."

Program outcomes include:

- 77% participant completion rate
- 27 learners received SFU Community Capacity Building Certificate
- Completion of four community projects
- Increased knowledge of human and Aboriginal rights
- Increased knowledge of community history and cultural traditions
- Increased self-awareness, self-confidence and self-efficacy

***"What the students got out of Stepping Stones was the opportunity to look at their lives and to make changes on a personal level and then in their community. They received and learned ES to help them in their journey, such as computer use, connecting with the community, and the land, along with increased cultural awareness. They were given an opportunity to SEE the world they live in and how it impacts their lives today, and a choice of what to do next,"***

Community Tutor-Mentor<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Simon Fraser University, Continuing Studies, Community Education Program "Tutor- Mentor Curriculum Input Questions". Questionnaire. pg 3. Print. (2012).

## Transferability

Stepping Stones was designed to be delivered in the province of BC. However, the program approach of true partnership with indigenous communities, the blended learning delivery and the program curriculum are transferable to other communities.

In order for the program to be successful, developers must respect the amount of time that it takes to establish genuine relationships within the community and be willing to work collaboratively with the community to co-develop and co-deliver the program. The program curriculum will require flexibility and continuous adaptation to meet the needs of each individual community and the individual learners. Effective delivery requires: instructional staff with expertise in online learning, community development practices and indigenous learning principles and community-based staff who can support learners on-site. The model requires that all stakeholders share the same vision and that this vision is reflected in the program.

## Lessons Learned/Challenges

There were a number of lessons learned through the delivery of the program:

- The delivery of the curriculum needs to be flexible. It needs to respond to learners and have space for individuals and communities to infuse it with their own cultures, values, principles and traditions.
- The online Instructor needs to be included in the initial discussions with the communities and participants and play an active role in the orientation process.
- Some communities lack basic internet connectivity, making online training and communication difficult. It is important to ensure that participants have access to the connectivity and technical support required for online learning.
- Program budgets need to cover the costs of all participants' needs, including childcare.
- The program needs to be structured so the Tutor-Mentors living in the community have more responsibility for actual instruction. This will require increasing the Tutor-Mentors' training and orientation to the program.
- Graduations should be recognized as First Nations' honoring ceremonies and reflective of the program's values, learning principles and culturally relevant approach. These graduation ceremonies are part of the curriculum and the

learning. As such, they need to be recognized by funders as a continuation of the learning process and their associated cost integrated into the program budget.

## Benefits

***"This brought us out of our homes and brought us together and working together. And now that has gone out into the community with each student because we are all from a different household. And then it just gets bigger and bigger out there. And now it has encouraged other people out there to go and further their education, or to go get jobs, or to go look for a program like this out there. It has helped this community a lot. And people are walking around with their heads held up high now,"***

Stepping Stones Learner.<sup>6</sup>

Participants gained the tools they needed to make a positive change for themselves and their community. They recognized their own abilities and positive qualities and, in turn, were recognized for these qualities and abilities by their community. They built strong support networks with their co-participants and with community members. Some learners gained greater acceptance by the community after being somewhat isolated. Participants acquired transferrable skills that they can apply to future learning and employment. They were inspired and empowered by their learning and by their own achievements. They learned the importance of ES as tools for personal and social change. They became part of their community's present and its future. "It awakened the Spirit in some and instilled a sense of confidence and accomplishment that was not there before." Community Tutor-Mentor.<sup>7</sup>

The communities came together as a community. They created an important learning opportunity for their members that, in turn, benefited the entire community. They created a vision for their future. They reaffirmed and celebrated their histories and their

<sup>6</sup> Simon Fraser University, Continuing Studies, Community Education Program (2011). Stepping Stones; Community Capacity Building Certificate Program For Rural and Remote Aboriginal Communities [PowerPoint slides].

<sup>7</sup> Simon Fraser University, Continuing Studies, Community Education Program "Tutor- Mentor Curriculum Input Questions". Questionnaire. pg 5. Print. (2012).

traditions. They gained both directly from the community project and indirectly through the growth and change in the learners. These learners are now taking leadership roles in the community and have motivated other community members to become involved, continuing the cycle of community capacity building.

## Contact

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## Resources

The Stepping Stones website contains an overview of the program, program objectives and an introduction to the four First Nations partnering communities. The entire Stepping Stones curriculum (including embedded videos, downloadable resources, and instructional activities) is available on the website at: <http://steppingstones.sfu.ca<sup>8</sup>>.

### Stepping Stones' Program Logic Model of Evaluation

- Simon Fraser University, Continuing Studies, Community Education Program. "Stepping Stones Logic Model – Version 3.0". Print (2011).

### Evaluative surveys and questionnaires: Tutor-Mentor, Learners, Community

- Simon Fraser University, Continuing Studies, Community Education Program. "Tutor-Mentor Curriculum Input Questions". Questionnaire. (2012).
- Simon Fraser University, Continuing Studies, Community Education Program. "Stepping Stones – Learner Interview Questions". Questionnaire. (2012).
- Simon Fraser University, Continuing Studies, Community

Education Program. "Stepping Stones – Community Partner Questions". Questionnaire. (2012).

Douglas College, *An Aboriginal ES Journey, Facilitator's Guide and Participant Workbook* [www.douglas.bc.ca/training-community-education/essenatialskills.html](http://www.douglas.bc.ca/training-community-education/essenatialskills.html)

*A Road to Resilience in Hazelton, BC – Literacy and community development* [Video 9:25 min.] [http://en.copian.ca/library/multimedia/2010\\_legacy/hazelton.htm](http://en.copian.ca/library/multimedia/2010_legacy/hazelton.htm)

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<sup>8</sup> While people can access the SS website and curriculum, it is important to note that SFU offers the Certificate in Community Capacity Building in partnership with external funders, community groups or organizations only. The Certificate is not available for individual registration. For more information, please see contact Judy Smith and visit: <http://www.sfu.ca/continuing-studies/programs/community-capacity-building-certificate/overview.html>