

NATOONIKEW AANSAAMB: **SEARCHING TOGETHER FOR LEARNING AND RESURGENCE**

Valeria Cortés*, Kelly Loffler, & Tim Brigham

Royal Roads University

The Professional Project Administrator Program (PPA) is an employment-focused online program offered in partnership with Indigenous communities in Western Canada. Based on the findings from the research conducted after the program completion, we discuss two key components that contributed to a meaningful learning experience and to the success of the program: wrap-around support and cultural learning. Through métissage, an arts-based approach to knowledge sharing, we present Natoonikew Aansaamb (searching together), where we have woven together different voices and stories that offer a glimpse of the learning experience. Greater inquiry and engagement with diverse Indigenous perspectives is the way for educators to design, implement, and assess learning for all students with intention and in a good way.

Taanishi. We are a team whose aim is to understand how to offer education *in a good way* (Ferland, et. al., 2021). The phrase represents the alignment of the mind and the heart; it captures the intention of our actions and invites us to learn from our ancestors and to consider future generations in our decision-making (University of Calgary, 2017). It is about embarking on a journey of self-awareness and understanding of how our ways of being, thinking, and doing impact our worldview; it is about building relationships and being attentive to the responsibilities that come with this declaration of being in relation (Donald, 2012, p. 535). For this reason, and in the spirit of learning in relationship, we start by introducing ourselves and acknowledging all the People, the Land, and relationships that sustain our work. Maarsii.

My name is Valeria Cortés. It is such a privilege to be a part of this team. Through co-creating the collective leadership course for the PPA Program and engaging in the research project¹, I have learned so much about Indigenous ways of knowing and being; as a result, I experienced a resurgence in interest for my Mexican pre-Hispanic culture, languages, and origins. As a mother, preserving and celebrating culture is a priority.

My name is Kelly Loffler. I am a proud citizen of the Métis Nation British Columbia and the Manitoba Métis Federation. As a graduate of the PPA Program I contributed to the research as a research assistant. I reside in Winnipeg, Manitoba on Treaty 1 Territory, the ancestral lands of the families of the Anishinaabe (Ojibway), Ininew (Cree), Oji-Cree, Dene, and Dakota, and the birthplace of the Métis Nation.

¹ Institutional Ethics Approval was received for this research.

*Corresponding author – val.cortes@royalroads.ca

My name is Tim Brigham. I am grateful to be the Project Lead for Project Connect. I am of settler descent and currently reside on the territory of the Quw'utsun People in the Cowichan Valley. The work I do with the PPA Program and other programs in partnerships with Indigenous communities reflects my values of bringing the university to communities and co-creating learning opportunities for Indigenous students.

We are committed to indigenization, to rebalancing power and control in the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples (Wilson et al., 2020). We strive to centre Indigenous people and Indigenous Ways of Knowing and Being in our work. The journey has not been easy, and we are not there yet. We are aware that our work reflects the complexities that exist within higher education, particularly when institutions operate on colonial Euro-Western worldviews, therefore becoming places of resistance for Indigenous Peoples and knowledges (Alfred, 2004; Battiste, 2005).

In this context, and upon receiving a grant from Future Skills Centre², the partnership previously established between Professional and Continuing Studies at Royal Roads University and Métis Nation British Columbia (MNBC) resulted in the creation of a new employment-focused program for Métis learners. The Professional Project Administrator Program (PPA) is an 18-week online certificate program with credit and non-credit courses aimed at developing a broad range of transferable skills in project administration, a connection to employment opportunities, and access to wrap-around supports available to participants for the duration of the program and beyond. A key component of the program was the inclusion of a Métis Elder to promote cultural learning.

The first iteration of the PPA Program ran from October of 2020 through February of 2021 and included three cohorts of Métis learners. Shortly thereafter, in the spring of 2021, the research phase began. The intent of the research was to learn about the impact of the PPA Program on the learning community. We wished to understand how program features and relationships contributed to a completion rate of nearly 98%: of a total of 46 students that started the program, 45 graduated. Research on Indigenous participation in higher education suggests this is a high graduation rate (Shaienks et al., 2008; Walton et al., 2020).

Based on the findings from the PPA research (Cortés et al., 2022), which was conducted by graduates of the very same program, we discuss the impact of wrap-around supports and cultural learning. In addition, we include a script created using *métissage* (Chambers et al., 2008; Donald, 2012; Etmanski et al., 2013), where various quotes from the research were woven together to create a braided narrative to provide a glimpse of the learning experience.

The Professional Project Administrator Program (PPA)

Building relationships matter for students in the way educational programs connect them to their aspirations, to their cohort, and to the way they see themselves reflected in the programs (Walton et al., 2020). Therefore, the guiding principle when designing and delivering the PPA Program was *shakamohta*, the Michif word meaning connect. Through the program, we focused on building connections between students, with Métis culture, and to career supports, all with the goal of delivering a life changing experience for the learning community.

Due to the covid-19 pandemic, we pivoted to a fully online program (as opposed to a blended model); interestingly, we realized that students preferred the online model due to accessibility and the opportunity to connect with other students from across British Columbia.

² <https://fsc-ccf.ca/>

This pivot also enabled participation by students that would not have otherwise been able to participate in the original, regionally focused design of the PPA.

The PPA curriculum included both credit and non-credit courses that aimed to develop skills in project management and administration, proposal writing, budgeting, data management and reporting, as well as communication and presentation skills. The program also integrated Michif language, cultural activities, and a leadership course based on Indigenous worldviews.

Various wrap-around supports were woven throughout the 18-week certificate program and remained available to participants for the duration of the program and beyond. The career and employment support available to students and graduates continue to be utilized and still prove to be beneficial many months after the completion of their program.

Research as an Act of Resurgence

The research study that followed the completion of the three cohorts of the PPA program was an opportunity for twelve graduates to become researchers. The call to be employed as a research assistant received an enthusiastic response; as one graduate said, “this program has given me so much, I would like to give back”. Another described their involvement in research as an “act of resurgence” connecting them with their culture.

Starblanket (2018) describes Indigenous resurgence as an awakening and a relational process towards the revitalization of Indigenous ways. “The intent is for these efforts to contribute to the restoration of our ability to practice the relationships with people, places and practices that were disrupted through colonialism” (p. 29). With this perspective, learners would become the researchers and not merely the researched.

Following a convenience sample (Blair & Blair, 2020), student researchers collected the experiences through end of program semi-structured one-on-one interviews with their peers. This approach grounded on relational accountability (Wilson, 2008) was accompanied by the data analysis of senior researchers, who were not part of the PPA program, with the purpose of eliminating bias. After the interviews and data analysis, student researchers presented their findings at a gathering where a graphic recorder captured the findings as presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Student Researchers Themes Cohort 1



Note. Graphic Recording from the PPA Celebration of Findings where cohort 1 student researchers shared their findings. From Cortés et. al. (2022).

The research team identified a variety of themes that were related to the lines of investigation: overall impact of the program, student and cultural support, application of knowledge and skills, confidence/ leadership skills, and teamwork, among other. The contributors to success included a variety of topics related to having a supportive community and certain aspects of the program. From these themes that include online classroom engagement, skills development, teamwork, and support from instructors/administration (Cortés et al., 2022), we focused on wrap-around supports and cultural learning as two aspects of the program that had a strong impact on students and relate to confidence building. These findings support the work that scholars (Fredericks et. al., 2017; Ober & Frawley, 2017) have previously discussed.

Wrap-around Supports

The value of wrap-around supports and how these created and consolidated positive outcomes was clear. Throughout the research interviews, students expressed surprise at the support available: “I was never supported like this in any of my other education”. These supports included:

- Living allowances provided through ISET³ funding facilitated by MNBC
- Technology support (laptop, keyboard, mouse, MS Office 365)
- Engagement with Elder
- Cultural activities (weaving, beading, jigging, fiddling, Michif language, and more)
- Access to counseling services provided by an Indigenous counselor
- Career development webinars and one-on-one individual career support
- Individual professional coaching sessions

The university partnered with a career management group to provide career and job search support for students within the program. Students accessed templates for resumes and cover letters, learned about social media marketing techniques, and informational interviews. They received guidance on how to conduct job searches, recognize and access the hidden job market, negotiate job offers, identify the value of job fairs, and other networking strategies.

In addition, students had access to a learning management system (LMS) developed by the career management group which provided them with access to a broad range of templates and tools, as well as regionally specific labour market information, especially important given that students were spread across almost every region in the province. The LMS also supported opportunities to connect students directly with potential employers in their local regions.

Learning and career progression is an iterative and dynamic process; employment does not necessarily come right after graduation. One student from the first cohort obtained their ‘dream job’ 10 months after they completed the program, a success they attributed in part to the interview practice and preparation support they received after completion. “The support I experienced through this program is unmatched by any other post-secondary experience I’ve had”.

³ [Indigenous Skills and Employment Training Program \(https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/indigenous-skills-employment-training.html\)](https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/indigenous-skills-employment-training.html)

Having access to these resources was beneficial for students. However, all the resources in the world may not prove effective without the care of and connection with the staff offering these supports. As Pidgeon's (2008) research findings show, the reciprocal relationships that occur among students, staff, faculty, and community members are essential contributors for success and a feeling of belonging.

Cultural Learning

Culturally relevant learning approaches are also key contributors for success in distance education for Indigenous learners (Cochrane & Maposa, 2009; Walton et al., 2020). Therefore, we have a responsibility to consider the role culture plays within learning environments and to become aware of the systemic and personal challenges that prevent us from intentionally integrating emotional, physical, spiritual, and cognitive dimensions of learning, regardless of the discipline.

However, many educators lack the motivation or the skills to engage in holistic learning design; to engage in conversations about culture or worldview; or to let go of their status in academia. In the current context of what can be said and how, we may become paralyzed by ignorance, guilt, fear of reprisal, or lack of confidence. Consequently, it might be safer to assume that culture is out of the scope of a course, or not relevant.

We were fortunate to have an Elder and Knowledge Keeper from the Nation to guide the cultural components in the program and connect us with several Knowledge Keepers from within the broader Nation. The Elder hosted weekly sessions where students learned about culture: Michif language lessons, medicine bags, fire bags, weaving, jigging, beading, bannock making, and more. Each session included storytelling and opportunities to build community.

Many scholars have written about the power of the arts as an approach to social transformation: "Working and learning collectively through artistic processes... develop new paradigms for comprehending and valuing culture and people's aesthetic selves, promoting consciousness and knowledge, stimulating imaginative critique, (and) re-constructing and re-positioning cultural identity..." (Clover & Stalker, 2007, p. 2). During the cultural sessions, the Elder created a space for students to bring their whole selves, tell their stories, and ask questions. The combination of a learning community coming together, tapping into arts and story-telling, and experiential learning opened the door to resurgence and self-efficacy.

During the research interviews, many students spoke about resurgence, confidence, and their commitment as Métis citizens. As one of the students said, "[I have] a greater understanding of why the shame was created in my family, and not to blame my family for that, but I have a better understanding now and a lot more appreciation for the Métis struggle and a lot more personal will". Another student said, "[the program] gave me confidence, courage; brought me closer to my spirituality as well as opening my eyes to a brighter future..."

In Western academia, attention to the spiritual learning domain is seen as taboo, due in part to conflated concepts of spirituality and religion. Many scholars (Antoine et al., 2018; Battiste, 2007; Lafever, 2016) have offered perspectives on how to move beyond the confusion, inviting educators to engage students' whole selves and to include learning outcomes related to "honouring, attention to relationships, developing a sense of belonging, feeling empowered to pursue a unique path, developing self-knowledge of purpose, and ultimately transcendence of narrow self-interest" (Lafever, 2016, p. 416). The invitation is to encourage a worldview where human values are intricately woven with all aspects of life and disciplines.

Métissage

Historically, the art of weaving together cloth of two different fibers was referred to as *métissage*, a word that comes from the Latin word for mixed *mixtus* (Worley, 2006). In the context of education, *métissage* is a woven narrative that has been applied as a method to engage people in research, teaching, or community development (Bishop et. al., 2019) and it draws from writing, storytelling, theatre and, symbolically, from the art of weaving or braiding (Chambers et al., 2008; Etmanski et al., 2013). According to Donald (2012), “Métissage is a research sensibility that mixes and purposefully juxtaposes diverse forms of texts as a way to reveal that multiple sources and perspectives influence experiences and memories. Métissage, as research praxis, is about relationality and the desire to treat texts – and lives – as relational and braided rather than isolated and independent” (p. 537).

We often thought about weaving as a metaphor for our research approach: different coloured strands woven together, representing different voices and experiences. Through *métissage*, we have intentionally woven together quotes from our research to tell the story and to share a glimpse of what the PPA Program meant for us.

As you read *Natoonikew Aansaamb* (searching together), imagine the strands of different colours moving within it: red, blue, green, white, yellow, and black representing the voices of the Elder, learners, instructors, support staff, and researchers coming together in a warp and weft, weaving and unraveling, learning and unlearning.

Natoonikew Aansaamb (Searching Together)

A Métissage

Elder: The Métis women with loving hands wove family sashes. Each coloured thread embodies meaning as it is woven together. One thread alone cannot stand on its own, but when woven together, each coloured thread supporting the next, the result is a sash that is strong, effective, and meaningful...

Staff: It all originated with a ‘what if’ (dreaming discussion) over lunch with some Indigenous and non-Indigenous colleagues. What if the Nation worked with the University to offer skills training for Indigenous learners?

From that conversation to the confirmation of funding, for Project Connect through the Future Skills Centre, spanned approximately 12 months. During this time, the relationship with the Nation staff deepened as we developed a common understanding of how to work *in a good way* together.

Through guidance from MNBC staff, our assessment of the province’s labour market, and our own sense of where the needs were for this kind of training, we designed the PPA Program, a mix of credit and non-credit courses aimed at preparing graduates for employment with a broad range of skills in project administration.

Student 1: In March of 2020, I was let go from my job.... I was in a spot where I was very unsure of what I was to do in the future, how I was going to move forward...

Student 2: I was very insecure when I first filled out forms to go into this program... and at my age and not being in an academic setting for so many years it did feel a bit like maybe I'm stepping out of my comfort zone too much.

Student 1: I felt super grateful for the Nation for paying for it all...Because I wouldn't have been able to do it, otherwise...it was always something I really recognized and felt gratitude for.

Student 2: I expected it to be less workload, to be honest...with the first week, maybe even two weeks, it was super overwhelming, and I had moments where I just thought, what did I get myself into? But then when I got involved in it, I recognized that No! I'm Okay, this isn't that bad, I can do this...

Student 1: Instructors were amazing. I really appreciated the camaraderie and shared support of our peers, of our fellow classmates. Everybody was so supportive of each other ... We all were really rooting each other on and there just became a familiarity and kind of a safety to share what was really going on for us.

Instructors: We are honoured to have had the opportunity to share with and to learn from the students... Through our course, which kicked off the program, we wanted to create and foster a strong community, explore the foundations of collective leadership from an Indigenous approach, build up our students' confidence, and dream a world we want to be a part of.

Student 2: I was at a point where I didn't think I could finish the course, I just thought it was a bit much, and I was overwhelmed (but) with speaking with instructors and everybody, I was able to get a little bit more encouragement and support to hang on and finish it and classmates being able to help out and be supportive. And I didn't expect the amount of support that came along with the program... It was a lot more than I could have ever anticipated.

Student 1: Fridays with the Elder were really the highlight of the week for me. I enjoyed all of the workshops, I think I attended all of them. I don't think I had to miss any. The language was really great, and I've been sharing that with my daughter. And the medicine bags were awesome - my daughter loves smelling the medicine bags.

Elder: I thought it was going to be the usual 'come speak for a bit'. After speaking with Tim and realizing that they were going to put Métis Culture into the program I was so excited that culture was really wanted. Because it is needed but when it is wanted it is even more exciting. I'm so grateful and so honoured to be a part of this.

Student 2: The cultural aspect was a wonderful surprise. I wasn't anticipating there to be such a culturally diverse experience. Like it is just a little bit of everything to do with Métis heritage and culture.

Instructor: Down the road from me there is a Métis daycare being built...I go by there feeling proud... I feel like I belong a little bit to this culture, even though I'm not Métis.

Student Researcher: I noted the empowerment of the culture, people felt they had a right to their culture whereas before, as I went through the interviews, people were saying “I really did not feel that I fit in but then it was like I have a space at the table because of this course”. To get to witness that in others was magical.

Student 1: I was really impressed with the end of the course and having the Career Development weeks. That changed, I’ll say my life, because it’s what got me my job. I definitely am open to further education and feel like I can do university level courses now having done this program, it gave me a lot of confidence. This kind of gave me the nudge to be more active in my role as Métis citizen.

Student 2: I really enjoyed the employment support. She is exceptional. She spent a lot of time with me, preparing for an interview. And she put in like hours outside of her regular work hours to help me prepare for this interview ...I was totally blown away by her skill level, the level of support like how she showed up to help me, she’s one person that really stands out in my mind and I got the job.

Student 1: I’m still in touch with her [career support]. I think she’s fabulous. That was critical and crucial. I think the only other thing that I could think might be nice to add would be if there was just drop ins available with elders where you could book slots and just to check in or get guidance on things.

Daughter: To see my mom and the commitment she’s had and the confidence that this course has given her is so inspiring...I know many of you have little ones who can’t necessarily communicate how absolutely proud they are...but I promise, this is really cool for them.

Instructors: We hope the students were able to carry these teachings forward, not only in their academic spaces, but more importantly in their everyday lives. By the end of the program, it was evident the students' growth, learning, and skill development. We look forward to hearing what they do with this knowledge. We are so proud of each of them!

Student 2: My overall feeling reflecting back is just gratitude - and how much gratitude I had, for the people who created the program, the instructors that taught the courses, and the people that I worked with. It was just ... an amazing experience, and I really appreciated the opportunity to partake.

Student Researcher: We appreciated as students so much that we still wanted to improve the program, to recognize the value of what you [staff] put together and do what you can to help carry these types of programs into other university settings.

Student 1: I was really questioning where to go next and it has given me a lot of hope for my future, as far as going into the workforce again, and really helped me build on skills that I needed to build on... I was like okay yeah, I’m going to do it on my own, and then I just never did it. [The program] allowed me the commitment to do [that] and [an online] space to do that and provided me with the opportunity to make relationships with the people that I attended these courses with. It was a really great experience.

Conclusion

We have learned much over the past years, and we know that we still have a long way to go. We have invested in wrap around supports and attempted to ‘deepen’ the cultural experience for students by having cultural activities interspersed throughout the PPA program, and with the constant presence of a knowledge keeper – in this case a Métis Elder – who guided the cultural experience for the students and provided insight to staff and faculty.

We know that embedding cultural components in the PPA Program resulted in a strongly positive experience for students. The results of our research indicated a clear correlation between culture and the students’ confidence building. We believe the cultural components, in addition to the wrap around supports, and the care and connection of staff and faculty, have contributed to the high student retention and completion levels seen within the program.

We know there are still advancements to make and will be looking to further indigenize the content of the program for future deliveries. Our future commitments, as we plan to deliver the program with First Nations, are to develop the cultural awareness, cultural safety, and cultural learning of the faculty and staff. We are committed to greater inquiry and engagement with Indigenous faculty and researchers, as well as bringing Indigenous perspectives at the forefront of the work. We will continue to search for learning and resurgence, together.

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