

Breathing Northwinds: A Report

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Breathing Northwinds, a multi-year project from 2007 to 2009, was aimed at 1) further enhancing the development of a northern arts network currently in formation, 2) conducting a northern needs assessment among urban Aboriginal and First Nations community artists, organizations and organizations-in-formation, 3) facilitating the development of local and regional action plans and 4) delivering professional development training. Breathing Northwinds was launched at the 2007 Manitoulin Gathering, which served as an opportunity for participants across linguistic and cultural communities to network, in some cases for the very first time. Participating northern communities included Manitoulin, Sudbury, Summer Beaver, Moose Factory/Moosonee, North Bay, Atikokan, Thunder Bay, Kenora, Evansville and Kettle & Stony Point. Local Manitoulin artists were able to showcase their work, as well as demonstrate one of the many ways in which relationship building in northern communities can take place.

The '07 Gathering also increased enthusiasm for exploring models of artistic development in northern Ontario, models whereby local artists rely on their own communities—as opposed to other regions of the province—for resources and markets.

There are a variety of other ways in which communities have benefited, and are continuing to benefit, from the Breathing Northwinds project. These include: building on existing relationships between artists and organizations as well as establishing new ones; the formation of new arts groups such as the women's arts collective which included artists from different communities as well as Teme Anishinabe Elders; the consolidation of information collected and shared throughout the project, the use of consultation reports to apply for funding, advocate for cultural policy and develop action plans; and capacity building within communities.

Relationship-building

In Temagami, new relationships were formed among artists in the Municipality of Temagami, the Temagami First Nation (TFN) and neighbouring North Bay during gathering activities. For instance, youth artists on Bear Island (TFN) collaborated with Aanmitaagzi in North Bay on a theatre piece that was shown at the gathering.

The 2009 Temagami Gathering, which had about 500 participants, also enabled relationship building within TFN which at the time was experiencing an internal crisis. Community members on all sides of the issue worked together to make the gathering a success and in doing so, illustrated how the arts can be a vehicle for healing tension in communities.

The gathering also served as a learning opportunity for non-Indigenous participants from the Municipality of Temagami who reported their amazement after hearing about their First Nations neighbours. Participants at the Gathering from outside the Temagami region came from Sudbury, Manitoulin, Sioux Lookout, Sault Ste. Marie, North Bay, Wausausing FN, Nipissing FN, Muskrat Dam FN, Lac Seul FN, Walpole Island FN, Parry Sound, Mnjikaning FN, Six Nations of the Grand River, Toronto, Hamilton, Peterborough and Kitchener-Waterloo. We even had one participant from Galiano, B.C. (Coast Salish). And from recent conversations with this participant, we learned that parts of the Temagami Gathering has informed her work in the Williams Lake region of B.C.

As part of the Temagami project, CAO's Executive Director led a workshop at the TFN primary school on Bear Island and met with community leaders including the school's principal, then Chief Gary Potts, and the economic development officer to advocate on behalf of community artists. Then board member Sherry Guppy arranged for a grant writing workshop for local artists to learn about acquiring funding to produce and showcase their work.

Subsequent feedback from local organizers of the gathering indicated that both the municipality and TFN had come to view arts production and activities as contributing to local economic development, quality of life and retention of cultural knowledge. As a result of the gathering, the Temagami Community Foundation (TFN) is discussing hosting another event in the spring of 2010 which will focus on grant making partnerships among First Nations community groups and non-FN organizations, as well as how to strengthen the First Nations granting sector.

In Sioux Lookout, a new group formed in anticipation of hosting a 2010 arts gathering (which has since been postponed). Catalyzed by our consultations in Sioux Lookout, the municipality invited Lac Seul FN to co-host and co-organize a 2012 arts gathering. And mainly through online technologies, other First Nations representatives in the surrounding region have also joined in the organizing efforts. From the Temagami Gathering, community reps from Sioux Lookout and Lac Seul who attended established relationships, learned lessons and developed ideas which will feed into their gathering efforts.

CAO also takes pride in anecdotal feedback detailing how “Weaving Tapestries” and the Cultural Mapping report fed into Sioux Lookout's relationship building work. Excerpts from the Cultural Mapping report were posted on the Sioux Lookout Anti-Racism Committee's website (at the time of writing) and there was also a link to our WT report.

We in turn learned quite a bit from the development of relationships in the Sioux Lookout region. For example, some of the unique features in Sioux Lookout have to do with: 1) using anti-racist & decolonizing educational frameworks, 2) consciously using arts processes to address community issues, 3) supporting youth empowerment, 4) drawing on FN cultural protocols to enhance collaborative work with FN artists and organizations and 5) promoting the notion that relationship building is personal as well as professional; that interpersonal linkages are integral to the process.

But our most important lessons in both Temagami and Sioux Lookout have to do with understanding the resource limitations in both communities (as well as in other northern communities). Despite the drastically different networking models in place (for instance Temagami's networking depends on face-to-face relationships while in SL online networking makes the most sense), both communities face similar challenges in terms of their ability to build relationships beyond what has been culturally, historically and geographically established at this time. Consequently, networking across northern Ontario is currently beyond their capacity and is not a stated priority.

Information sharing

The sharing of information from consultation reports across communities has resulted in catalyzing collaboration between and among communities. For example, sharing information about the loss of artistic/craft-making skills in a consultation involving the fly-in communities of Kingfisher Lake, Mishkeegogamang & Nibinamik has resulted in initiatives to share skills training among those communities online. Furthermore, discussions to collaborate on training and marketing initiatives among those communities as well as Lac Seul and Sioux Lookout have commenced.

Consultations with Francophone communities on the other hand, enabled us to learn more about their networking needs. We have learned that Francophone communities prioritize relationship-building with each other while networking with English-speaking and other communities is less of a priority. Reasons for this include the fact that: 1) the default language of networking outside of Francophone communities is always English and this is of limited value to Francophone artists and groups; 2) different funding streams and non-government resources structurally tend to favour working within linguistic communities; 3) limited funding for translation and interpretation stretch the capacity of both communities to collaborate and; 4) developing a strong Francophone community, which is the number one priority, involves relationship building across generations as well as across multicultural Francophone groups. However, the aforementioned reasons do not preclude the willingness of Francophone and Anglophone communities to build relationships around arts production, showcasing and marketing.

The Francophone community's priorities tend to be true in First Nations as well, where intergenerational sharing, transferring of traditional knowledge, skills and language are seen as foundational to ensuring culturally and economically sustainable communities. The centrality of supporting arts and culture in First Nations communities has long been recognized as crucial to the process of community building, and generally, from these strong foundations First Nations communities are better able to network. At the same time, the limited resources of band councils and the need to deal with crises have meant that arts groups and individual artists often practice without much-needed

support. This highlights the need to resolve unique underlying resource and capacity issues that are rooted in colonial relations.

In terms of common issues across communities, we have learned and shared the following:

- 1) There is a desire to build and strengthen existing networks between/among arts communities and those of other sectors.
- 2) Developing strong local networks is a priority for the purposes of sharing resources, information, success stories, etc. Networking beyond the local community is secondary.
- 3) Cultural communities appreciate municipal/First Nation support - both concrete and in-kind. There are municipalities and First Nations that are not fully capitalizing on the arts and culture sector to assist in developing healthy, resilient, sustainable economies and communities. And there is a general feeling that arts and culture need to be better integrated into community development and planning, with the involvement of arts communities in the discussions.
- 4) Collecting this information and sharing it with others enables groups and individuals to better connect around common issues.

Observations

One unexpected result was the cost of the 2007 gathering and the heavily subsidized participation, which led to questions and differing visions concerning models of relationship building. The recruitment of an Advisory Circle – Community of Artists of Northern Ontario (CANO)— to Breathing Northwinds was thought to be the starting point for determining how work in northern Ontario would take place. However, CANO representatives had very different ideas as to the priorities and visions for Breathing Northwinds.

Another unexpected result was our discovery that solid networks already exist in the north and they are rapidly expanding, despite the many challenges. We have seen the degree to which networks are fast forming and we are coming to understand the complexities of the relationships being formed, the diverse networking needs and processes that are being employed, and how they relate to culture, geography, language and history. Given this complexity, there is resistance to the imposition of external models even when proposed by other northerners.

Needs Assessment

NORDIK at Algoma University was contracted to carry out the needs assessment. NORDIK results will be available under a separate report.