

Adult literacy forum gives voice to bigger issues

By SARAH LADIK, Northern Journal Reporter • Tue, Oct 30, 2012

Critical questions of self-determination cannot be solved until Northerners' culturally specific essential skills are recognized across the country, argued participants at the "Made in the North" literacy forum in Yellowknife last week.

"We're at a time where young Northerners are really stepping up to big questions like devolution, self-government and self-determination, and if we want to be stepping forward into decision-making roles, a lot of skills need to be recognized by the south," said Erin Freeland Ballantyne, presenter and founder of the NWT's Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning, a facility offering university-accredited courses through an innovative land-based approach.

The three-day conference on adult literacy brought together education professionals from across the three territories to discuss specific solutions for unique Northern problems with adult education - mainly, the limited access to resources, both geographically and culturally.

Participants gathered to share best practices and make connections that they could then bring back to their respective territories to implement at the community level.

Ballantyne was particularly impressed with the grassroots nature of the majority of programming across all three territories, adding that institutional change tends to be driven by community groups recognizing a need and doing something about it.

She also maintained that encouraging all Canadians to recognize that basic essential skills are not limited to the ones decreed by the federal government would be a monumental step in placing the fate of the North in the hands of the people who live here.

"People see literacy as a softer issue and I think it was articulated (at the conference) that a strong future in which Northerners can make decisions for themselves and communities are in charge of their destinies really depends on having engaged community capacity where literacy skills are embedded in cultural identity and common experience," she said.

Spencer Tracy, an instructor at the Native Women's Association Training Centre in Yellowknife and another presenter at the conference, agreed that learning, especially for those who struggle with basic skills, needs to be tied to culturally appropriate material.

After 10 years of teaching with resources produced in the south, Tracy and his fellow instructors created a new textbook geared specifically toward a Northern population working at a Grade 4 to 6 level and began using it in classrooms in September.

"All the examples are based on Northern experience, history and geography and, right off the bat, students find that comforting and something they can relate to, which lessens their math anxiety and makes it easier to pick up the skill," Tracy said.

The new textbook also makes use of everyday objects - like tape measures, playing cards and dice - to help students understand the practical value of math.

"We want to teach people skills that won't just help them pass a standardized test, but also help them in their everyday life, like comparing prices at the grocery store or looking at election results and understanding percentages."

As important as these skills are, Ballantyne argued they're only half the equation. The federal government has set out a limited list of essential skills, and money for adult education is funneled to those specific programs, such as literacy and numeracy.

"We're looking at what the broader range of core skills Northerners believe are necessary to have successful, healthy communities - stuff like knowledge of history, critical thinking and conflict resolution," she said. "The forum facilitated a conversation about the essential skills we need to have healthy, sustainable, vibrant communities, and how they are perhaps different from the guidelines set out by the federal government."

"Made in the North" was intended, among other things, to create links between education professionals across the territories, but it resulted in discussions that covered far more than basic adult literacy.

"What a network we have of transformative programming," Ballantyne exclaimed. "It really touches on all ages and different regions. There was a lot of excitement about how if we can share these strategies and best practices, then we'll really be looking at a full transformation of what lifelong learning looks like in the North."