Putting Down Roots: Our Diverse Communities Knowledge Exchange

Report

Overview
The Putting Down Roots: Our Diverse Communities Knowledge Exchange event was an opportunity to exchange knowledge on good practices to welcome newcomers into Alberta communities. Using the Welcoming Communities umbrella established by Citizenship and Immigration Canada both nationally and provincially, the event showcased recent initiatives to create more welcoming communities in Alberta communities. The focus for the event in addition to sharing information about each initiative was to focus on the evidence of community and organizational change and on the role of collaboration in creating more inclusive and welcoming communities.

The event was targeted for adult learning and literacy providers, immigrant service providers and voluntary sector organizations interested in engaging newcomers as community volunteers. Currently conferences and association meetings for these stakeholder groups provide limited opportunity for cross-sector, cross-organizational collaboration and knowledge exchange. Opportunities that do exist such as inter-agency meetings occur within a community and do not provide an opportunity to share information across different communities. We found this event provided a means for a multi-sectored community of practice to share and learn from each other around the common topic of welcoming communities.

The event was also a pilot to test using the iCCAN video-conferencing network as a means to connect and share knowledge across rural and urban Alberta communities. Community Adult Learning Councils and/or Literacy Councils were asked to sign up as host communities and became regional hubs for people to gather and to engage in networking at a lunch following the 2 hour video-conferencing event. Since its implementation, the iCCAN video-conference network is changing access to professional development, professional networking and communities of practice for learning sites across Alberta. We believe this event provided a unique opportunity for this diverse community of practice to share ideas and learn from initiatives in other communities. This way of hosting the event changed many of our initial assumptions about how to promote and hold the event. The coordination services provided by iCCAN shifted the need for external advertising to promotion through the Community Learning Network and Literacy Alberta electronic listservs and to local promotion for the event. In the process of recruiting hosting sites, many of the participants became aware of and registered for the event. Given the high participation rate, we feel this use of coordination services and technology was an efficient way to promote the knowledge exchange event.

Vera Calvert, Executive Director and Barbara Prescott, instructor, at the Edson and District Community Learning Society presented on their experience with the Roots and Connections pilot project. The pilot included offering an ESL program to newcomers requiring English Language skills. The Roots and Connections resource being piloted integrates building community connections and intercultural skill development as part of the language learning program. The materials are targeted at newcomers who are most likely to be isolated in a new community, adults with very low English language skill levels who may not have many connections within the community. Vera and Barbara shared their experience with the program in a larger rural center with a diversity of learners and a diversity of resources and services in Edson that are available to their learners.

Sherry Gagne, Executive Director of the Provost Adult Learning and Literacy Society which serves the communities of Provost, Hayter, Cadogan and Czar and the Vice Chair of the Community Learning Network spoke about the impact of her participation in the Roots and Connection pilot on the learners in her program, on her organization and the community of Provost. Sherry shared her experience in a smaller, remote rural center with a diversity of learners and relatively limited community resources and services available to learners.

Lori Harasem, Special Events and Volunteer Coordinator at the Galt Museum and Archives in Lethbridge presented on the project, Students, Stories and Archives, a recent initiative in which newcomer high school students were

trained to research current immigration stories from their families or within their ethnocultural communities. Recognizing that current levels of immigration in Lethbridge are as significant as its earlier history, these stories were added to the archives at the museum to support future historical research. This project will become an annual event to engage newcomer students as volunteer researchers with the museum. Planning for an exhibit based on this work is underway. Lori participated in the Intersections project, led by Volunteer Alberta, that explored how to integrate newcomers within voluntary sector organizations and to increase newcomer volunteerism. Her participation in the Intersections project led to the development of the Students, Stories and Archives project.

Outcomes

1) **Creating connections across organizations and communities.** 97 participants (86 registrations) from 17 communities attended the event. This event represents the most number of sites and participants at a session coordinated by iCCAN through videoconferencing. The participant exceeded our expectations and showed that the promotion of the event through the iCCAN website and through the Community Learning Network electronic network was an effective promotional strategy. Feedback from the evaluation of the event indicates participants valued having access to examples of cross-organizational initiatives to welcome newcomers, to learn about how to approach collaboration in rural communities. Participants also valued the importance of innovative collaborations (e.g. engaging newcomers as volunteers) and partnerships to address welcoming community goals. Participants indicated they would be able to transfer this knowledge to their organizational and community context. Participants also valued the opportunity to discuss ideas generated through the videoconferencing event and network with individuals in their own community from other organizations over the lunch following the video-conference portion of the event. The knowledge exchange event stimulated new ideas and ways of thinking about cross-organization collaborations and welcoming newcomers.

2) **Increased awareness of the importance of building relationships as a key component to engage newcomers and strengthen fabric of the community.** Communities who have had limited settlement of newcomers in the recent past need to learn new ways to engage newcomers, especially newcomers from culturally different backgrounds than the people who have settled the community. Participants provided feedback on the importance of building relationships with individuals in ethnocultural communities and with members of community organizations. Participant feedback indicated strategies to engage newcomer and existing community member groups were valued. The importance of engaging all community members to create welcoming communities was demonstrated in different ways by each of the panellists in the event; based on evaluation feedback their experiences and example provided inspiration and practical strategies to participants to invest in relationship-building as part of community development.

3) **Increasing the profile of welcoming communities initiatives.** The event contributed to increasing the profile of initiatives to welcome and integrate newcomers into communities. Participants were asked through an online survey at registration to identify welcoming activities occurring within their community. Results were compiled and shared in the beginning of the knowledge exchange event. Discussions and evaluation feedback indicated that the knowledge exchange event provided information, resources and evidence to help participants address the changing profile of their communities. Participant feedback showed they valued seeing evidence of changing awareness of diversity in one of the presenting communities and the beginning of change in perspectives and engagement of existing community members towards new community members.

4) **Increasing awareness of the diversity of Alberta communities.** Participants were asked to complete an online survey to collect data about aspects of their diversity (e.g. ethno-cultural heritage, organizational/group affiliation). Results were shared with the participants prior to the panel presentations and issues of diversity in Alberta communities were discussed. Panellists discussed the diversity of their communities. The knowledge exchange event contributed to discussion about the changing demographics of rural communities and the need for changing services and collaborations to address changing demographics.

Participants

Participants included coordinators, instructors and volunteers from Community Adult Learning Councils and Adult Literacy Councils, representatives from Immigrant Service providers, and researchers (based on introductions at each site). Evaluation results indicated participants benefitted from new information on how to engage newcomers, practices to integrate newcomers into rural communities and information about new and freely available resources. Participants also valued the opportunity to discuss ideas generated through the videoconferencing event and network with individuals in their own community from other organizations over lunch immediately following the video-conference portion of the event.

Collaboartive Aspects

A collaboration has developed between the Rural Routes initiative team, the NorQuest Centre for Excellence in Intercultural Education, iCCAN and the Community Learning Network to deliver workshops via video-conferencing to support use of the newly released Roots and Connections resource, developed by the Centre and funded by Alberta Employment and Immigration. Quality ESL services in rural Alberta communities is an important part of the overall welcoming communities umbrella. The Roots and Connections resource is designed using welcoming communities principles and approaches.

The Rural Routes initiative, in its 9th year, supports small English as a Second Language providers in rural and urban centers through professional development, mentorship and resource development. Its mandate is to enhance the quality of ESL programming for small providers in rural and urban Alberta communities. Currently the Rural Routes team includes 6 individuals working in regions across Alberta to support small ESL providers who primarily operate out of Community Adult Learning Councils and Literacy Councils. This project will use the iCCAN videoconference network to promote the Roots and Connections resource and to help providers use the Roots and Connections resource to deliver ESL programming. The project will also support the capacity development for the Rural Routes team so they can use videoconferencing as part of their services to ESL providers. The capacity development component of the project will contribute to the ongoing offering of professional development and mentorship services for ESL programming in rural Alberta communities.

Next Steps

The NorQuest Centre for Excellence in Intercultural Education is contining to engage rural partners via the iCCAN videoconferencing network as part of our projects. Currently, we are building our capacity to pilot newly developed online resources via videoconferencing toGrande Prairie to support English language development and intercultural communication skills as part of the Online Workplace Language Resources project funded by Alberta Employment and Immgration.