

# Capilano University: "Gathering Together: Introduction to Small Business Startup within Indigenous Communities"

Enhancing Displaced Workers' Literacy and Essential Skills Project

Pilot Project Report | December 2023

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## DWLES Project Overview

Capilano University's "Gathering Together" pilot project was part of the Enhancing Displaced Workers' Literacy and Essential Skills (DWLES) project, which was a collaborative project that was managed by Decoda Literacy Solutions (Decoda) and supported by the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC).

The overall goal of the DWLES project was to better understand how literacy organizations can support hard-to-reach remote and rural communities by integrating literacy and essential skills (LES) and employment services for a range of displaced workers, with a particular focus on equity-deserving groups such as women, Indigenous peoples, newcomers, people with disabilities, and others.

The first phase of the project began in June 2019 and finished in June 2022. It included two components: background data collection and analysis and beta-test projects. Detailed implementation and outcomes findings of this phase of the project can be found in the [Second Annual Report](#) and the [Final Project Report](#), respectively.

The project received an extension to December 2023 to implement a second phase focused on pilot projects. The purpose of this phase of the research was to expand select organizations' beta-test projects into scalable and transferable pilot projects. Upon completion of the beta-test project phase of DWLES and receiving funding for a pilot phase, five literacy organizations were selected to continue for the pilot phase of the project. The organizations were selected based on their successes and lessons learned from the beta-test phase.

Capilano University's pilot project involved expanding the reach of Gathering Together to a new community in Lower Mainland, BC. The following profile provides an overview of this pilot, including the transition from the beta-test to pilot phase, program implementation, key findings, and promising practices.



## Beta Test to Pilot Project

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For the original beta-test phase of the DWLES project, Capilano University designed and delivered Gathering Together: Introduction to Small Business Startup with Indigenous Communities, which is a community-based entrepreneurship training program for Indigenous learners. It was developed and implemented in partnership with the Ts'ilil Learning Centre, which is owned and operated by the Li'wat First Nation. It was delivered in two First Nations communities: Li'wat and N'Quatqua First Nations. It supported learners' goals for self employment by working within the communities, building capacity within the Nations, having flexible schedules to balance multi-generational family obligations, and supporting employment that grows and gives back to the community.

The pilot project aimed to engage additional First Nations communities with the goal of expanding the reach of Gathering Together to Indigenous entrepreneurs in other communities. To do this, the pilot project lead worked with the Eslha7an Learning Centre, which is owned and

operated by the Squamish Nation and is located on the Sk̓w̓wú7mesh Úxwumixw traditional territory in the Lower Mainland region of BC. The Eslha7an Learning Centre provided support with marketing, participant recruitment and registration, and space for the program.

## Program Implementation

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Similar to the beta-test phase, the Gathering Together pilot project was delivered in-person over eight weeks of class instruction for four hours each week. There were two cohorts of learners open to Squamish Nation Members, as well as any First Nation Status, Non-Status, Métis, and Inuit living on the North Shore and Greater Vancouver area.

The Gathering Together curriculum was quite similar from beta-test to pilot project, while placing a greater emphasis on a holistic approach to entrepreneurship. While focusing on entrepreneurial training overall, the curriculum also included strategies to help learners manage their stress and anxiety and supported learners' readiness by developing their literacy, numeracy,



and digital skills. Half of each class was dedicated to instruction on entrepreneurial concepts with the remaining half dedicated to practical learning related to business development. Based on feedback from learners in the beta test, the curriculum was slightly shortened and simplified to make it more relevant and accessible for learners. Interestingly, the pilot project lead, who also facilitated the program, noted that the original curriculum from the beta test would have been a better fit for the learners in the second cohort of the pilot. They described how learners in this cohort were further along with their business development, so would have benefitted from a less simplified curriculum like the one in the beta test. Given the learner-centred nature of the program, the curriculum was able to be adapted and responsive to learners' needs, so that more detailed content was brought back into cohort two.

## Key Findings

In total, 19 learners participated in Gathering Together, with almost all learners fully completing the program. A couple of learners left the program because they either were too advanced for the program or faced barriers to participation that were not able to be addressed through program supports. Learners ranged in age from 19-60+ years old. Given the program focus, all learners self-identified as Indigenous. While the pilot project lead expected learners to be from neighbourhoods close to the Esliha7an Learning Centre, learners travelled from areas across the Lower Mainland to participate in the program.

Findings from the surveys and focus groups with learners further validated and strengthened the findings from the Gathering Together beta-test. The findings indicated that a holistic approach to programming grounded in respect, relevance, responsibility, and reciprocity created an accessible and welcoming learning environment for Indigenous learners. Additionally, learners continued to highlight how Gathering Together helped them identify their entrepreneurial goals and direction. Interestingly, learners in the pilot project particularly highlighted how Gathering Together helped them become more motivated and confident in moving forward with their entrepreneurship journey. They also described how their participation in the program increased their connections with other Indigenous peoples who shared entrepreneurship goals.

## Motivated and Confident

Many learners reported feeling more motivated to take the next steps in their entrepreneurship journey as a result of participating in Gathering Together. Some learners described how in the past they struggled to move forward with their business goals, but that the program helped them to identify the next steps and create a plan. For example, when learners were asked about the most impactful part of the program, one learner shared:

“ [The program] helped with getting your idea on paper. You know you what you want to do up here [in head], but it's hard getting it from here to here [head to paper]. ”

Another learner described how the program helped motivate them to take tangible next steps to move forward with their business development:

“ I'm feeling more motivated. I do have an appointment this week to start the Mentorship Program with Employ to Empower. This will be good to motivate me more and figure out the business talk and paperwork. ”

In fact, at the end of the second cohort almost half of learners were planning, or had already enrolled, with Employ to Empower's entrepreneurship programming. Employ to Empower is a grassroots charity in Vancouver that empowers people with work and social barriers through entrepreneurial resources, training, and tailored one-on-one mentorship. The facilitator invited a guest speaker from Employ to Empower to inform learners about their resources and to connect them with their services.

For other learners, the program helped to increase their confidence in taking the next steps to entrepreneurship. This was particularly the case for learners who had previously struggled with working towards their entrepreneurship goals. One learner noted that they had struggled with entrepreneurship in the past:

“ I've always wanted to do it [become an entrepreneur] since I was 19 and I've fallen many times. [After this program] I'm finally in the right place. ”

Another learner described how the learnings from Gathering Together shifted their perspective on entrepreneurship, which helped

them to feel more confident in opening their business:

“ [The biggest takeaway for me was] that [my business] doesn't have to be perfect right away. Coming out of other [business-focused] courses, I was trying to make it perfect and I didn't even know what perfect was [with my business]. But now I know I can do a soft opening, I can do this or that, and I have more avenues until I get it right. ”

For the following learner, Gathering Together helped them to feel more motivated because it affirmed their entrepreneurship goals:

“ I've helped a lot of people with their business, but now it's time for me to do it myself...[participating in Gathering Together] affirmed that I need to do this for myself. I know I can do that because I've been doing this for other people, so it affirmed I can do this for myself. ”

## Connected to Others

Many learners in Gathering Together indicated that they became more connected to other Indigenous entrepreneurs through the program. Some mentioned how they particularly appreciated that the program was for Indigenous peoples. They felt that it was important for Indigenous entrepreneurs to come together to share ideas and learn from each other. One learner described how they had few opportunities to do this prior to participating in Gathering Together:

“ It is nice to be back on reserve and connect with other [Indigenous people], as I want to help Indigenous businesses. In my [other business programs] I don't see many [Indigenous people]. ”

When asked about the value and importance of having an entrepreneurship program specifically for Indigenous peoples, learners in both cohorts all agreed it was very important. As one learner explained:

“ We're each other's cheerleaders. We support each other's ups and downs and helping each other do the work. Definitely the group is good. ”

This was something not only shared among the learners, but also observed by the facilitator:

“ The learners really support each other a lot and encourage each other to take the next steps. We have the teach time and then we have the coach time, where they all coach and encourage each other... what I have noticed is they do a lot of talking with each other. There's a lot of discussion happening and a lot of learning. They're learning from each other. ”

Some learners who were more connected in the community shared their contacts with other learners in the program and also shared information about available resources. Many learners indicated that they had exchanged phone numbers to continue connecting after the program.

Additionally, having a program specifically for Indigenous entrepreneurs meant that the

facilitator could invite guest speakers who provided supports specific to their needs. For example, Tale'awtxw Aboriginal Capital Corporation (TACC) delivers funding programs to Indigenous entrepreneurs within traditional Coast Salish territory, as well as Campbell River, Comox, and Liłwat. The facilitator invited a representative from TACC to speak to both cohorts, which learners reported finding very useful.

## Program Suggestions

Learners provided some suggestions for future iterations of Gathering Together, including a slightly longer program, as well as additional topics and guest speakers.

Learners appreciated that the program was a relatively short commitment during the week; however, many learners suggested that additional time would be helpful for further developing their business ideas. They suggested having either a longer program where they could cover more topics or having two separate programs: one that was a short introduction and then a second one that went into more detail for those who were further along in their entrepreneurship journey.

Learners also suggested additional topics and guest speakers for the program. Learners who suggested additional topics felt that they would benefit from learning more about business terminology, administrative support with opening a business, human resources, and business taxes. Learners identified that they could also benefit from additional guest speakers, especially from those who have lived experience as an Indigenous entrepreneur. Some learners suggested inviting Gathering Together alumni into the program to share about their entrepreneurship journeys.



## Promising Practices from the Pilot Project

In addition to the promising practices from the original beta-test, two other promising practices emerged from the Gathering Together pilot project, which are described below.

### 1 Providing opportunities for learners to take tangible next steps:

As part of Gathering Together programming, the facilitator provided many opportunities for learners to take specific and tangible next steps to advance their goals. The findings indicate that many learners from Gathering Together took advantage of these opportunities and had taken steps to move forward in their entrepreneurship journey. For example, the facilitator invited entrepreneurship-focused organizations (e.g., Employ to Empower, TACC) to present to the learners about their services and resources. This provided learners with options for direct support and further training upon completion of Gathering Together. Additionally, the facilitator informed learners of other entrepreneurship-focused training and supported them with their applications. One learner participated in a youth entrepreneurship summit that they found out about through Gathering Together.

### 2 Offering entrepreneurship training specifically for Indigenous peoples:

Many learners expressed how valuable it was that Gathering Together was specifically for Indigenous peoples. They indicated that they had few, if any, previous opportunities for an entrepreneurship-focused program that was specifically tailored to Indigenous entrepreneurs. They appreciated that they were able to relate to and build relationships with other Indigenous people who had entrepreneurial goals. Furthermore, having this specific population for the program enabled the facilitator to identify resources that are available only to Indigenous entrepreneurs, such as those available through TACC and the Indigenous Youth Entrepreneur Forum.

### Additional project information

This report is part of a series of 5 individual pilot project reports developed for the DWLES project. To learn more about the DWLES project, please visit: [decoda.ca/our-work/displaced-workers-landing](https://decoda.ca/our-work/displaced-workers-landing).

