







job clarification were required before the development of a PMP for the support staff. A 2018 survey of the Administrative & Technical support staff and their managers (usually a local principal, vice-principal, or the Community Education Administrator [CEA]) identified skills that the Administrative support staff required to perform their jobs effectively as well as the training needs for the support staff to improve their abilities (efficiency, capacity, and quality of work) in completing their day-to-day tasks. 128 Core Skills were identified in this survey and grouped into categories: computer skills, organizational skills, business writing, note-taking, and interpersonal skills. In addition to these skills, colleagues at the Sabtuan Adult Education Services suggested that Essential Skills training would provide the necessary foundations for success in the Core Skills training program.

The outcomes desired for the training program included perspectives from the participants, their managers, and the CSB as a whole. For participants, desired outcomes included feeling valued by the CSB and their managers, increased confidence in their skills, increased pride in their work, increased self-esteem, increased comfort in taking initiative, increased motivation and engagement. For managers, desired outcomes included autonomous, qualified, and competent staff, increased capacity, reliance, consistent performance outcomes, and a decrease in absenteeism. Other outcomes included that support staff sees themselves as ambassadors for the CSB and they understand the impact their roles have on student success. The results of this survey informed the development of the CLJ. After research into existing accredited and other training programs, the CSB opted to develop a customised program that would meet the unique needs of the support staff and ensure that the day-to-day realities and real-work examples could be incorporated into the training.

Darlene Wapachee has worked for the CSB since 2013 and started as Human Resources Advisor and Learning and Development Coordinator for the Cree School Board Human Resources department from 2019. One of her first tasks was to develop a program that would meet the needs of these evaluations, a task she was mandated by HR Director Natalie Petawabano. Part of Darlene's role is staff professional development. Within the schools, teachers are given regular time for development through the PED days each term, but it had been recognized that the administrative staff in the schools would also benefit from an investment in training. The majority of the administrative support staff within the schools are community members, with varying levels of formal education. Some staff have undergraduate and post-graduate degrees or certificates, while others may be recent high school graduates. Most of the staff are fluent in *iiyiyiu ayimuwin* (the Cree language), French, and English, with French or English being their 3<sup>rd</sup> language (depending on where they grew up) and are survivors or descendants of survivors from residential (so-called) schools.

For her own career development, Darlene holds a Bachelor degree in Arts, majoring in Psychology and Human Relations. In 2019 Darlene attended a three-day Kaos Pilot Masterclass in Montreal, Canada, to learn about methods for experiential learning<sup>4</sup>. During this workshop, attendees were invited to pitch a real-life project for the group to work on over the course duration. Darlene presented her project, contextualized with the reality that most of the people the course was intended for had extremely negative learning experiences in residential schools (directly, or indirectly through ensuring inter-generational trauma<sup>5</sup>), and she wanted this program to celebrate and be embedded with *iiyiyiu* values and cultural norms.

For Darlene, it was essential for the program to be a positive learning experience, especially for residential school survivors:



(April 2020), appreciative inquiry sessions were held with the principals and CEAs (June 2020); and the support staff (September 2020). Final adjustments were made to the programming based on the results from these sessions.

The appreciative inquiry sessions gave opportunities for feedback from key program stakeholders and brought them into the program development, to check that the program aligned with their expectations and desired outcomes. This was essential to generate enthusiasm, commitment and to support the success of the program over the long term. The goal of these sessions was to gain an understanding of where the Administrative Support staff are today, and where they want to be in the future. The meetings were structured to encourage collaborative discussions around learning and development.

During the appreciative inquiry sessions, the managers were supportive of the overall design of the program and felt that it would support the outcomes they desired for their staff, namely, to make them more self-sufficient and efficient, to increase their motivation and engagement, to make them more confident and proud of their work, to reduce absenteeism, to give them the confidence to train their peers, to increase their comfort in using workplace tools and technology, and to improve customer service in the workplace. The managers were somewhat wary of the time the program would take from their support staff performing their daily tasks because the staff are essential to the smooth operation of the schools.

The support staff who participated in the sessions identified key characteristics needed by a successful Administrative staff member, namely, being highly organized, having strong communication skills, being a hard worker, being able to work as part of a team, being trustworthy, able to meet deadlines, willing to take responsibility, and able to support colleagues' absences. To support their success in the program they expressed a need for their managers' support, to align expectations from their managers with their work deadlines, to have support from their facilitator, and to have access to laptops to work on for the training sessions.

The goal of the training program was to empower administrative support staff by providing them with the tools, knowledge, and support they need to be more impactful and efficient in their role. This was to be achieved through building capacity, setting employees up for success, developing a sense of lifelong learning, and demonstrating the commitment the CSB has for the professional development of its employees.

The foundational portion of the CLJ focuses on the joys of learning together, building rapport within each group, and building relationships with the facilitator. The standard Essential Skills program was used as a model for enhancing fundamental skills to improve support staff's ability to perform basic components of their jobs, alongside these desired outcomes. The initial CLJ program included forty-five hours (roughly two weeks of intensive, all-day sessions) to cover nine Essential Skills. Essential Skills is a program that is defined by the federal government of Canada and has been delivered by Sabtuan Adult Education Services in the past. The skills include Reading, Document Use, Numeracy, Writing, Oral Communication, Working With Others (Teamwork), Digital Technology (Computers), Continuous Learning and Critical Thinking.

Some of the experiential learning sessions combine many of the skills [Image 2]. The ingredients for making boudin are usually measured by eye, as taught by accomplished Elders. This is a dense cake that can be baked or boiled, depending on what you have been taught. This activity uses skills like numeracy, critical thinking, continuous learning and working with others – all of which are discussed in the session debrief. Participants use the hands on activities for putting together slide shows using PowerPoint in later phases of the training.



Image 2: Clarissa Wapachee, Harriet Wapachee (boudin teacher), Sheena Napash [Facilitator], Hattie Wapachee, Jaqueline Icebound – Nemaska Cree Nation, showing off their boudin.

In another example, the ‘Writing’ session is not meant to teach someone *how* to write, but it is designed to use culturally relevant exercises *about* writing so participants build on their existing writing skills in new and fun ways. This was particularly important for participants whose education may have included spending time at residential schools, where *iyyiyiu* culture and language were forbidden and even punished. As a Nation, we are still dealing with the ongoing and inter-generational trauma from these schools. Centring our language and culture in our educational programming is one of the many ways we show our resilience and strength as *iyyiyiu* people.

*Iyyiyiumuwin*, the *iyyiyiu* language, is spoken widely as the first language in *Iyyiyiu Aschii* in multiple dialects. *Iyyiyiumuwin* does have written and typed syllabary but at present, English is the usual written language in schools and workplaces. An example of an experiential learning writing activity shared by non-*iyyiyiu* facilitator Laura Phillips was watching videos about *iyyiyiu* culture on the website of Aanischaaukamikw Cree Cultural Institute, the cultural institute for *Iyyiyiu Aschii* (Aanischaaukamikw):

We watched five short videos, each around two minutes long, that show different aspects of *iyyiyiu* culture and history. These videos are informative yet also thought-provoking in that the participants have tended to have emotional responses to what is shared. This then acts as inspiration for their writing. In one session, Brenda Pachano-Sam wrote about one of the videos bringing back a childhood memory of playing under the chairs at a community meeting in Fort George, when her father went to discuss the

relocation of the community before the construction of a hydro-electric dam by the Province of Quebec in the 1980s. After writing their initial response, participants swap their writing and ask questions about each other's writing. Participants then re-write what they have shared for an audience that knows nothing about Iiyiyiu Aschii or Iiyiyiu culture.

After the Essential Skills foundation, the Core program covered different specific skills and application-based learning for our participants to build capacity and increase the quality and efficiency of their work. The Core program was developed specifically for the CLJ in collaboration with Sabtuan Adult Education Services. This part of the program covers Microsoft Word, Proofreading, Business Correspondence, Customer Service, Telephone Greetings, Document Management, Microsoft Excel, Microsoft PowerPoint, Meeting and Events, Technical Support, Coordinating Multiple Tasks, Outlook, and Accounting/ Handling Cash. These topics were delivered for roughly seven hours a week, over seventeen weeks (about 3.5 hours in two weekly sessions), though holidays and, in the first years of the program, the Covid19 pandemic, meant that the schedule needed to be somewhat flexible.

Delivered through experiential learning techniques that were designed to maximize participant interaction and learning through activities, the CLJ intertwines our Iiyiyiu philosophy and ways of knowing throughout the training program. This includes consulting with Cree programs and our Elder advisors, developing activities that link traditional teachings to our places of work, offering opportunities for support and mentorship from Elders [Image 3].



Image 3: Blanche Awashish [Facilitator], Britney Commonda, Destiney Isik-Blacksmith, Catherine Wapachee, on Lake Scott, near Ouje-Bougoumou Cree Nation. For this activity the group snowshoed around a cultural camp (Nuuhchimi Winnuu), enjoyed tea and donuts, and learned some winter survival skills from Elders David and Anna Bosum. As a debrief activity, the group researched new Cree words they learned.

The program is not a pass/fail program, but instead offers participants opportunities to self-reflect on their learning journey and to share their observations with



person throughout the year. Laura is based outside of the region and met her group for the first time in person at the graduation event in October 2021.

The role of the facilitator is to develop lesson plans and prepare learning materials that use experiential learning methods to achieve the defined outcomes for the program, support identified learning objectives, connect with participants' managers, interact with the other facilitators to build supportive relationships, to provide one on one support for participants as needed, and to participate in regular check-ins and curriculum co-design sessions with the program supervisor (Darlene) and the program support team.

The CLJ program launched with a 1.5-day virtual event in November 2020. The objective of the launch was to celebrate the training program, to generate excitement and commitment to the program. The launch included a high-level overview of the program, introductions to the cohort and facilitators, and insights from guest speakers.

All of the participants were successful in their completion of the program and were proud to have achieved their personal goals in the journey. At a re-connecting event where all of the groups virtually came together in April 2021, some groups shared PowerPoint presentations about their journey. This was a very motivating and powerful experience for all of the attendees because many of the presenters were speaking publicly to a group for the first time, and for many, it was their first time making and delivering a PowerPoint presentation.

A survey was undertaken at the mid-point (April 2021) and end of the program where participants shared feedback about their experiences. The mid-point survey had a 94% response rate, with 89.5% either Satisfied or Strongly Satisfied with the training program. 100% of respondents responded positively to the question 'Would you say the program is meeting your expectations?'. Some of the quotes included:

"This is a very interesting learning experience, plus it has made me have more confidence in me!"

"I really enjoy this course, it's like a refresher for some of the things we're being taught."

"I love this training. I am glad I took this training. I do notice the other support staff who did not enrol in this training have less confidence in speaking in front of groups, whereas we who took the training have confidence to do so."

"This program and group helped me realize the importance of teamwork. The importance of having a working and a personal relationship with coworkers."

"I like this course. I have gained confidence and the programs that I have learned will be helpful in my everyday work. Overall, I'm satisfied and I don't want to miss any scheduled classes."

Facilitators were surveyed on their experience delivering the program, with all feedback being considered for the planning of the second year of the program. Covid19 precautions meant that we held the graduation event in October so that we could all travel to be together in one place, in Val d'Or. This was an emotional and exciting event, with many of us meeting in person for the first time after a year of virtual meetings [Figure 2]. After the formal program ended, some of the participants enrolled in the Secretarial Certificate program offered by Sabtuan Adult Education Services. Other participants will continue their learning journeys in as-yet undefined ways, with new confidence in their abilities to commit to their own personal growth.





Image 4: Alexandria Coon, Kathy Petawabano, Cheryl Moar putting mixed up photographs in order to show the chronological steps in fixing a moose hide, from harvest to moccasins, Mistissini Cree Nation.

Neanne Cheechoo, one of the *iiyiyiu* facilitators, emphasized how she brought *iiyiyiu* culture to her sessions:

Being Cree myself, I've always been around laughter and snacks which are signature in gatherings whether they are small or large gatherings. I ensure that there is plenty of space for all of this during my sessions. It is important that they feel comfortable with learning as well as making some errors or mistakes, and providing feedback when necessary. For me, the group responds well when the sessions are more discussion, conversation and activity-focused rather than lecture-focused.

Table 1 presents a selection of examples from our detailed lesson plan charts, highlighting each learning theory stage and our lesson goals. All skill sessions tend to start with a discussion and completing questions in their Participants Handbook to SET the learning,

and finish with a post-skill discussion (or discussion-based activity like journaling or beading) and post-skill assessment in their handbook to LAND the learning. This is meant to demonstrate KOLB's 4 cyclical stages of learning: Concrete experience (feeling), reflective observation (watching), abstract conceptualization (thinking), and active experimentation (doing).

### **Continuous Learning Journey: Feedback & Future Plans**

This article has presented an overview of the development of a professional development program created by the Cree School Board for their own Administrative and Support staff, from which over 125 participants have graduated as of July 2024 [Image 5].



Image 5: Participants, CSB leadership, HR team, CLJ Facilitators at the 2024 graduation in Montreal, Quebec. Front Row L-R: Valerie Herodier, Margaret Rupert, Catherine Wapachee, Destiney Isik-Blacksmith, Britney Commonda, Carrie Ann Herodier, Hattie Wapachee, Abigail Loon, Kara Rabbitskin, Elder Lucy Shem (Advisor). Middle Row L-R: Devine Loon, Dr. Sarah Pashagumskum (Chairperson), Darlene Wapachee, Susie Rupert, Joshua Dick, Jacqueline Icebound, Clarissa Wapachee, Leanne Neeposh, Angela Mianscum, Caroline Mark (Director General), Natalie Petawabano (Director of Human Resources). Back Row L-R: Sheena Napash, Nanne Cheechoo, Dr. Laura Phillips, Blanche Awashish (Facilitators).

The CLJ program centres Cree values, culture, and language. While the program has faced challenges due to schools and departments being short-staffed and unable to commit to a long-term, regular training program, we have been able to tailor the delivery to maximize what is realistic and feasible for the staff. This has been one of the key advantages of having a flexible, modular training program designed in-house to meet and reflect the needs of our staff. As the second-largest employer in Iiyiyiu Aschii (the first being the Cree Health Board), we must build on the existing skills and experiences of our community members to undertake positions instead of recruiting from outside our region. Building skills for our nation reflects our iiyiyiu strength and resilience, as well as our characteristics of self-determination and self-sufficiency, all of which we carry from our ancestors, forward into future generations.

### **References**

Cheechoo, Shirley and Phyllis Ellis. ?2013. *Pikutiskwau*. Unpublished play.



**Table 1. Example Continuous Learning Journey Lesson Plans**

Example CLJ Lesson Plan Charts					
Activity	Description	Goal (Set, Hold, Land)	3 Hs, 3 Vs	Skills	Materials Required
Sharing Circle	Answer the question 'what do you read'?	Set	Head, Heart, Verbal, Visceral	Reading, Oral Communications	N/A
Individual Learning Document	Completing pre-activity assessment in learning journal	Set	Hands, Visual	Reading, Writing	Participant journal
<b>Skill: Working with Others / Teamwork</b>					
Mind Map: Making Bannock	Work together as a group, brainstorm/map out process of making Bannock, including different techniques tried/ tested	Hold	Head, Heart, Hands, Verbal, Visceral	Writing, Oral Communications, Critical Thinking, Working with Others, Numeracy	Paper, pens
Moose Hide Preparation	Work together to put a series of mixed-up photographs in order to show the process of preparing a moose hide, from the moose hunt to the final product of moccasins	Hold	Head, Heart, Hands, Verbal, Visceral, Visual	Oral Communications, Critical Thinking, Working with Others	Photograph series
<b>Skill: Writing / Critical Thinking</b>					
Writing a poem	Write a poem describing their goose break camp	Hold	Head, Heart, Hands	Writing	Paper, pens
<b>Skill: Numeracy</b>					
Making boudin with cranberries harvested in	Learning by observing, measuring, timing, and making sure	Hold	Head, Heart, Hands, Verbal,	Writing, Oral Communications, Critical Thinking,	Recipe ingredients, paper, pens

Iiyiyiu Aschii	the recipe is correct, using the correct ingredients. There are different techniques to try to perfect this recipe.		Visceral, Visual	Working with Others, Reading	
Skill: Reading					
Pikutiskwau	Reading out loud from the play (Cheechoo 2013)	Hold	Head, Heart, Hands, Verbal, Visceral	Reading, Oral Communications, Working with Others	Copy of the play
Mind's Eye (Masty et al. 2013)	Reading a story, answering questions, sharing & discussing answers	Hold	Head, Heart, Hands, Verbal, Visceral	Reading, Writing, Oral Communications, Critical Thinking	Stories, questions
Journal / Beading	Private and group reflections on the activities: "what did we do today"?	Land	Head, Heart, Hands, Verbal, Visceral, Visual	Reading, Writing, Oral Communications	Journal, Beading supplies



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<https://experientiallearninginstitute.org/resources/what-is-experiential-learning/>.  
Danielle Bienvenue is a certified KOLB trainer, see Management Savvy, Home,  
<http://mgtsavvy.com/home/>.

7 Saul McLeod, "Kolb's Learning Styles and Experiential Learning Cycle," Simply Psychology, 2017, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/learning-kolb.html>.