



Case Study *January 2007*

Community-Based Learning Opportunities, Winner, 2006

Tamarack: An Institute for Community Engagement

At a Glance

- With partnerships in cities across Canada, Tamarack has developed the country's premiere website on community engagement and collaboration. The site acts as a catalyst to organize, animate and disseminate the knowledge and information needed to develop and maintain safe, healthy and progressive communities.
- COADE—a highly effective and unique learning approach in capturing, organizing, animating and disseminating information and knowledge, while engaging learners.
- This learning system helps groups working locally to learn together nationally by creating a fluid system of information sharing and dynamic learning.

OVERVIEW

Tamarack is a national charitable institute that helps Canadian communities take ownership of their local issues and develop collaborative solutions. Established in 2001, Tamarack works closely with local organizations to promote community building and to advance the socio-economic agenda of a region.

Using technology in innovative ways to advance the communities' agenda in Canada, Tamarack engages citizens in "inspired action" to create and realize bold visions for the future.

With partnerships in cities across Canada, Tamarack has developed the country's premiere website on community engagement and collaboration (www.tamarackcommunity.ca). The website acts as a catalyst to organize, animate, and disseminate knowledge and information needed to develop and maintain safe, healthy and progressive communities.

The Education and Learning case studies examine outstanding education and lifelong learning programs and initiatives. This case study addresses community learning, collaboration and engagement.

Name of Program
Tamarack: Advancing a Community of Practice

Date Established
2001

Skills Developed
Information and communication technology (ICT) skills

Contact
Louise Kearney
Director, Communications and Knowledge Management
139 Father David Bauer Drive
Waterloo ON N2L 6L1
Tel.: 519-885-5155 ext. 111
Fax: 519-885-4454
E-mail: louise@tamarackcommunity.ca
Website: www.tamarackcommunity.ca

At the heart of Vibrant Communities is the Pan-Canadian Learning Community (PCLC), a virtual network of communities, policy-makers and funders who share experiences, discuss policy issues, interact with resource people, address planning issues, coordinate learning activities, develop annual learning work plans, and work with project evaluators and sponsors to assess overall effectiveness.

Vibrant Communities connects 15 communities from British Columbia to Newfoundland.

OBJECTIVES

Tamarack aims to:

- advance the collaborative work of communities;
- build a “technology” that advances local ideas, supports people working together, and makes work both easier and more effective;
- help groups tap into national practices, learn from them and then apply them locally; and
- create a fluid system that encourages and supports individuals and communities to share information and learn in a dynamic way.

TARGET GROUPS

Tamarack targets individuals, groups and organizations interested in advancing the communities’ agenda in Canada by interacting on an ongoing basis through a common community of practice.¹

ACTIVITIES

An example of Tamarack’s use of information and communication technology (ICT) to advance a community of practice is its signature project, Vibrant Communities.

VIBRANT COMMUNITIES

Founded in April 2002 as a partnership between the J. W. McConnell Family Foundation, the Caledon Institute for Social Policy and Tamarack, Vibrant Communities connects 15 communities from British Columbia to Newfoundland in a collective effort and utilizes people, organizations, businesses and governments to reduce poverty in Canada.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEARNING

Since 2002, opportunities for learning through the PCLC have included:

- a series of Funders’ Network sessions on making comprehensive and social justice grants;
- a project on gender and poverty;
- learning initiatives on policy change, sustainable incomes, engagement of business, living-wage campaigns and government learning; and
- the recently launched Government Learning Circle, which offers government learners from all levels and portfolios across the country interested in Vibrant Communities the chance to come together on a virtual basis and learn how they can play a role in reducing poverty through collaboration with business, the voluntary sector and citizens at the local level.

RESOURCES

Tamarack has developed a unique learning approach, COADE, which has proven highly effective in Capturing, Organizing, Animating and Disseminating information and knowledge, while Engaging learners. COADE has been an effective tool for engaging and sustaining the interest of constituents and communities:

- More than 9,000 people interested in Tamarack’s activities are part of the institute’s database.
- Tamarack’s community engagement e-newsletter, *Engage*, is now disseminated biweekly to more than 7,200 people.
- In 2005, more than a thousand people engaged in Tamarack’s tele-learning seminars (including “Movements for Change,” “A Framework for Community-

Based Policy Change” and “Place-Based Approaches to Poverty Reduction”).

- More than 2,500 people receive *Eunoia*, a monthly digest of resources and research on community engagement and related issues.

INNOVATIONS

Tamarack has been able to take what was essentially an experiment—using ICT to develop a learning community—and make it a reality. Today, Tamarack’s learning system helps groups working locally to learn together nationally, by creating a fluid system of information sharing and dynamic learning.

Today, Tamarack’s learning system helps groups working locally to learn together nationally.

Tamarack has been able to use ICT to connect those who are disconnected by geography, sector and learning ability. It has leveraged ICT to share tools, knowledge and learning practices in order to advance a community of practice. Tamarack brings experts to practitioners’ desks via the telephone and has made just-in-time learning meaningful to community practitioners across Canada.

Because Tamarack is a learning organization that is constantly growing and adapting to meet the needs of its clientele and communities of practice, it has adapted an “organic” approach to the use of ICTs and learning approaches. For example, in recognition of the value-added learning resulting from PCLC tele-conferences, Tamarack was one of the first among its peers to make audio and MP3 recordings of the learning events available online.

CHALLENGES

One of the biggest challenges Tamarack faces in supporting and growing a national community of practice is the geographical distance that separates its numerous partners. Working across time zones and distances—throughout all regions of the country—makes it difficult to create meaningful opportunities for collaboration and peer learning.

As well, working within the relatively new and constantly evolving communities’ agenda framework requires Tamarack to develop different ways of engaging people and sharing knowledge.

SOLUTIONS AND KEYS TO SUCCESS

ICT has proven to be a valuable tool that helps Tamarack address the challenges of distance, time and the newness of the communities’ agenda.

The Internet, e-communication technologies and tele-learning platforms, in conjunction with face-to-face learning, give Tamarack the ability to:

- capture and display information on its website, through a variety of publications and by way of an electronic library;
- animate new learning and knowledge using graphics and accessible language; and
- disseminate learning through e-newsletters, its website, tele-coaching, online publishing and consultations.

OUTCOMES

In the first six months of fiscal year 2006, users visited the Tamarack website 45,000 times, viewing more than 320,000 pages of information and downloading more than 129,000 PDF (portable document format) and multimedia files.

Over 90 per cent of community representatives interviewed during an external assessment of Tamarack’s PCLC platform reported that they used some aspect of what they learned through the PCLC in their day-to-day work.

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IMPACTS AND BENEFITS

Many communities across Canada often work in isolation, with little or no opportunity to share or draw on the insights and accomplishments of others. Tamarack encourages them to join in a community of practice and engender new learning and knowledge.

Participating in Tamarack's community of practice allows large numbers of people to improve their skills and learn in a convenient, cost-effective manner.

To date, the Vibrant Communities initiative has affected more than 16,000 people in their efforts to overcome poverty. It is anticipated that, within the next five years, Vibrant Communities will be active in all of Canada's 34 largest census metropolitan areas, touching more than 30,000 people living in poverty.

USE AS A MODEL

Tamarack's learning system, including its use of ICT, has been recognized as a replicable model. Several national organizations have worked with Tamarack to

modify their learning approaches, based on the Tamarack methodology:

- The J. W. McConnell Family Foundation asked Tamarack to help advance its community of practice on sustaining social innovation.
- Community Foundations of Canada (CFC) is beginning to consider how to advance a national community of practice and had Tamarack host CFC representatives in a peer exchange to help further their thinking.
- PLAN Institute and VON (Victorian Order of Nurses) Canada are engaged in a number of national dissemination and learning initiatives and have consulted with Tamarack to seek advice on developing and distributing e-newsletters and tele-learning techniques, and on increasing the effectiveness of their e-communications platform using ICTs.

1 "Communities of practice recognize that knowledge lives in the human act of knowing; that it is tacit as well as explicit, social as well as individual; and that knowledge is dynamic." Source: Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott and William Snyder, *Cultivating Communities of Practice* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), p. 4.

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About the Education and Learning Case Studies

The Education and Learning case studies examine outstanding education and learning programs and initiatives. The case studies provide in-depth analysis of the methods used to develop, assess, implement and deliver education and lifelong learning in schools, colleges, universities, workplaces and communities. They focus on goals, activities, resource requirements, achievements and outcomes, benefits, innovations and keys to success and challenges.

This case study addresses the theme of community learning and highlights an award winner from the Community Learning Awards, funded, in part, by Human Resources and Social Development Canada's National Office of Literacy and Learning.

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By *Douglas Watt*

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255 Smyth Road, Ottawa ON K1H 8M7 Canada
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The Conference Board, Inc. 845 Third Avenue, New York NY 10022-6679 USA Tel. 212-759-0900 • Fax 212-980-7014 • www.conference-board.org
The Conference Board Europe Chaussée de La Hulpe 130, Box 11, B-1000 Brussels, Belgium Tel. +32 2 675 54 05 • Fax +32 2 675 03 95
The Conference Board Asia-Pacific 2802 Admiralty Centre, Tower 1, 18 Harcourt Road, Admiralty Hong Kong SAR Tel. +852 2511 1630 • Fax +852 2869 1403

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