

Reflection Document on Issues and Problems that came to light at our Meeting on October 11, 2008

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The mid-term Colloquium which brought us all together last October enabled us to see more clearly a number of challenges that arise in all research projects with a broad reach and ambition. These challenges are particularly evident in programmes like our own, *Aboriginal Peoples and Governance*, which is built on collaboration and the exchange among scholars drawn from different cultures, different generations, different languages and different disciplines. Our team is, obviously, not the first to have experienced these types of challenges. But we should also acknowledge that the special character of our project confronts us with unique challenges. This said, I am confident that the way we recognize and overcome these challenges can, if we do it well, be a model of collaborative scholarship. What I mean by that is that our project can serve to illustrate for others involved in similar complex undertakings best practices for mutual enrichment that necessarily accompany work grounded in intellectual diversity. With this ambition in view, the Steering Committee met last January 16 to reflect upon the best processes and structures to ensure the optimal research collaboration within the Team. The principles and general orientations that we suggest here are the fruit of this work of the Steering Committee. But they also incorporate insights from other members of the Team who have generously forwarded ideas and suggestions to us. I'd like to expressly thank everyone for their helpful contributions to our deliberations.

Nature of the Challenges Experienced by our Team

Two challenges in particular have presented themselves over the course of our joint research endeavours these past couple of years: one is a structural challenge; the other is a challenge arising at this precise moment in our history.

The first challenge is the most important, if only because it presents itself in several complementary dimensions. Essentially, it highlights challenges relating to our interactions with each other as scholars, and also relating to the interactions between us as researchers and the broader constituencies with whom we are engaged.

The first dimension I'd like to note is that which relates to **dialogue**. Even though dialogue is a fundamental objective of the project, it is clear that we still are on the road to discovering the best mechanisms for ensuring a fruitful dialogue among the multiple perspectives of our various aboriginal partners and of our own team members, as well as among different disciplines, both at an intellectual and at a personal level. The idea of dialogue underpinning the project is much richer than a simple articulation and superimposition of different perspectives. It aims at a genuine exchange. But we also know that what we call dialogue is much more than a mechanism by which we may exchange ideas; it is also a way of understanding and acting in the presence of others. It is not just a mere openness to others; it is a collective practice. In particular, a dialogue means that we do not assume that our own particular premises, assumptions, concepts and modes of presentation must be adopted by others. While staying faithful to our own research projects we must ensure that we express ourselves in a style of

language and format that engages all members of the team. Likewise, we must be willing to make an effort to adjust our own preferred methods of listening and reflecting so that we gain the most from our colleagues who present in a style of language and format different from ours. I know that I have not always accomplished that end, but it is my aim, one that I will try to fulfill.

We also have to face up to a special challenge of interpersonal communication arising from the diversity of languages in the team. The choice of language (French, English and Aboriginal languages) inevitably poses difficulties of comprehension among members of the team, despite the significant money that we have devoted to translation of our texts and to simultaneous interpretation (between French and English) of our exchanges during our research meetings. Language also poses difficulties at another, conceptual, level as well. The need to work in two languages often makes our exchanges with our partner Aboriginal organizations more complicated. These are not insurmountable difficulties, but they are, nonetheless, inherent in the structure of our team. Of course, to be fair to ourselves, let's acknowledge that we are not the first team of Canadian researchers that has encountered similar challenges. Just as importantly, it is a challenge for all Aboriginal organizations and scholars whose first language is neither French nor English. It is, in other words, a challenge we all face. It means, in particular, that we must be willing to see and hear in the register of the person who is speaking. Among other things, this means genuinely attending to music, art, totems, and other presentational form (e.g. videos of dances, ceremonies) that are used by our colleagues in their presentations.

Still again in connection with structural challenges, we should not minimize the challenge of **integration** within a team such as ours. I mean not only the difficulties of cross-disciplinary research collaboration, but also the particular challenges that arise from our desire to involve fully our students within the scholarly work of the team. It is important that we aim to permit everyone to contribute in their own manner and form to the research activities of the project and that we pay attention to developing tools of communication and exchanges that will reinforce among all scholars and all students their sense of being full partners in the work of the team.

We face the additional challenge of making our work and our research conclusions as **accessible** as possible. This includes ensuring that this work is accessible to all those who are involved in developing policy and strategies addressing the question of aboriginal governance. It also includes ensuring that the language and manner of presentation of our work is cast in a manner that is meaningful to our intended audience. This does not mean "dumbing-down" our work. Rather, it means expressing ourselves in a language that is respectful of our readers. In a slightly different dimension, it also means presenting our work in a meaningful fashion to other members of the team who may not share the disciplinary or conceptual frameworks with which we are ourselves working. We must constantly be on guard to ensure that all team members have equal access to the ideas, insights and findings, and that we be especially attentive to presenting our work in a way that facilitates a broad understanding and synthesis.

Finally, the success of our project depends on the full involvement and commitment of our **aboriginal partners**, and of the several aboriginal collectivities who have shared their ideas, their time and their communities with us. We have been fortunate to have received generous support and engagement. The confidence expressed by our partners gives us the opportunity to step outside our own frameworks, to seek insight from our partners and

aboriginal communities, and to reimagine our agenda and our goals from the perspectives of our partners and these communities. We have an extraordinary opportunity not just to listen, but to hear. This means that we must make space in all our activities so that our partners may assist us in designing, structuring and carrying out our meetings to ensure that their teaching and our learning is optimized. Our research cannot simply be engagement with aboriginal peoples as “objects” of our inquiry. Our research will succeed when we decentre ourselves and our perspectives so that we are just as much the “objects” of inquiry by our partners.

The second challenge arises because of the stage in the project at which we have now arrived. The conclusion of our last meeting may have left among certain members of the team a certain worry about how we would be able to continue our joint endeavour. We would like to propose a number of avenues that will enable us to respond to and to move beyond this momentary challenge. It is important not just for us to reassure each other of our commitment to working together and to making progress with our complex and important work, admittedly an important task at this time, but also to reflect deeply on how we can learn to work better with each other. Often in team endeavours, it is only once there is a certain experience with the concrete that it is possible to see where intellectual and theoretic divergences lie. Far from being a disjuncture, the mid-term conference was a privileged moment for us to take stock, and to begin a fruitful team engagement for the remaining years of our project.

A Few Foundational Principles to Ensure Better Coherence within the Project and the Team

Following its meeting in January the Steering Committee came to the conclusion that five fundamental principles underlie our collaborative endeavours: (1) **A respect for and a commitment to genuinely listening** to every member of the project; (2) **Effective communication and dialogue** among all members of the team; (3) The broadest possible **diffusion and dissemination** of ideas generated, and research results obtained by members of the team; (4) The **participation** of every member in the orientation and development of the team; (5) A commitment to **creativity** and the quest to develop new and unexplored research questions.

Of course, we could elaborate at length upon each of these principles. But we all know what they aim at and what they imply for each of us, both in respect of our attitudes, our activities and our openness to others. These foundational principles could easily serve any collaborative endeavour and scholarly research team projects are just one example of where they should apply. Instinctively we seek to find commonalities with each other, and even when we don't explicitly attend to these foundations, we find that we discover the richness of working with each other and come to a collective commitment to our shared aspirations. But it is good to remember and re-state them at periodic moments -- especially when particular challenges arise within a collaborative undertaking. In short, these principles need to be re-affirmed for any endeavour such as ours with specific, concrete proposals.

Concrete Proposals for Moving Forward

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The above noted objectives are both complementary and ambitious. To achieve them we propose a series of thirteen specific protocols, practices and strategic orientations for our future work.

1. We believe that we must move ahead with the three-year plan, focused on eight themes, proposed to the Team at our last meetings, and ensure that we build committees with the capacity to organize the pursuit of each theme. So doing will enable us to set up smaller research groups, which we believe will be more productive over the next three years.
2. We need to give to the organizing committees for these several upcoming colloquia the discretion to add additional elements, as necessary to favour the inclusion and expression of aboriginal perspectives. In particular we must ensure that our terminology and framing of questions is inclusive and serves to invite our partners to help us sharpen and recast the themes so as to best accomplish our objectives.
3. At each of our thematic conferences or activities we must ensure the presence and full participation of local aboriginal organizations and our partners.
4. We must ensure that each of these encounters is structured around a dialogue among :
 1. Multiple aboriginal and multiple non-aboriginal perspectives
 2. Team members who will bring different disciplinary perspectives to the encounter
 3. Students and professors
 4. Team members and partners
5. We need to ensure that each meeting and conference deploys formats and modalities of communication that will encourage these various types of exchanges and the formulation of constructive commentaries and critiques. We need to encourage the participation and active engagement of people who are capable of working across indigenous and non-indigenous traditions.
6. We need to ensure that communication in at least two languages (French and English) is possible at each of our activities and conferences for and by team members. We must also try to ensure the full participation of our aboriginal partners by facilitating the use of aboriginal languages where that will promote comprehensive exchanges.
7. To this end, all members who present at conferences are encouraged to submit a résumé of their remarks in another language besides that in which the presentation will be made. The Team will look after the translation of these résumés wherever this is needed to ensure a fruitful dialogue.
8. Furthermore, during conferences or colloquia that we organize, bilingual or multilingual members of the Team will be asked to offer a résumé of presentations made by unilingual members based on the texts that have been submitted for the conference. We believe this approach generally should replace the practice of having simultaneous interpretation that is often much too approximate, although we do believe that there will still be some occasions where the use of professionals should be retained.

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9. We shall ensure that communication between members of the Steering Committee should continue in both English and French and that where appropriate we should ensure full translation of each intervention or comment during our meetings.
10. During the final year of the project we will give the Steering Committee the mandate to propose procedures and specific concepts to ensure that aboriginal perspectives and ideas as well as practices and orientations common to both aboriginal and non-aboriginal societies are fully elaborated in our proposals respecting aboriginal governance.
11. We envision the establishment of an enlarged Steering Committee (including other members of the Team) in order to work on the synthesis of our findings during the final year of the project.
12. We will do what is necessary to ensure that under each research theme we draft texts in a language, vocabulary, grammar and syntax that facilitate their dissemination among their intended audiences – both aboriginal and non-aboriginal, academic and non-academic.
13. We will circulate all these ideas and proposals to all members of the Team for their comments and suggestions.

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We all know from experience that ideas and ideals (not least those that aim at strengthening research collaboration and the collective synthesis of efforts coming from a diversity of perspectives and backgrounds) really need to be expressed in concrete terms in order to be operationalized. What we propose here is aimed especially at those who have undertaken to organize conferences and meetings under each of the themes in the new three year plan. But every member of the team is invited to participate in this elaborative dialogue, which dialogue is after all the foundation of our collective project. This engagement comprises an intellectual dimension, to be sure, but it also comprises an affective dimension, that is, a interpersonal engagement founded on listening to others and a constant preoccupation with making sure that we are understood by others. The goal is to come to collective understanding of a complex reality, rather than simply to convince others of the “truth” of our own position. This, after all, is the essence of social life – an essence to which we have all committed ourselves by our engagement in this Major Collaborative Research Initiative.