

## Learning from the land in the North

Mr. Erigaktuk with a 32-pound lake trout caught by students on Blachford Lake.

(John Lehmann/The Globe and Mail) Learning from the land in the North Add to ...

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License AA Trishia Smith sips from her travel mug, being careful not to spill during the bumps and jolts of her morning commute along miles of snowy terrain. The 29-year-old is among a small group of students headed to its first class of the day, traversing miles of snowy terrain aboard a traditional Inuit sled called a komatik. Spruce trees pass on the horizon and the sun beams from a blue and cloudless sky.

About 20 minutes later, the sled slows to a halt near two fishing holes, one marked with a small inukshuk – a man-shaped pile of stones – this time made from blocks of ice. The students' first assignment of the day is to check the fishing net hanging between them, collecting and scaling the day's haul.

"And, we're at class," says Ms. Smith, climbing out of the sled.

The Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning is a highly unconventional school based out of a cabin on Blachford Lake, about a 20-minute ski-plane flight from Yellowknife. The single-semester program, delivered in a remote, wilderness setting, places equal weight on both academia and traditional, land-based learning. As of 2014, seven courses are accredited by the University of Alberta and McGill University.

Amid the national discussion on aboriginal education, the fledgling program has taken on a new significance. As First Nations leaders and the federal government clash over proposed reforms to on-reserve education, Dechinta – a program rooted in indigenous pedagogy, with direct links to traditional provincial education systems – is a model that shows that the two types of education can talk to and benefit from each other.

At the fishing hole, the drift net has ensnared more than 20 whitefish, a haul that would later be scaled, filleted and smoked over a fire pit under the critical eye of an elder professor. A 30-odd-pound trout sparks a discussion about the significance of larger animals to First Nations people – they are often seen as being akin to elders, there to guide younger generations – and the discovery of a parasite on one of the whitefish leads to a later discussion on environmental contamination.

When they are done, a student tosses a small handful of tobacco to the ground – a small gesture to thank the land for the provision of food – and they climb back into the komatik.

According to figures from Statistic Canada's 2011 National Household Survey, educational attainment for aboriginals has increased over time but still lags behind non-aboriginals. That year, almost half (48.4 per cent) of aboriginal people aged 25 to 64 had a postsecondary qualification. In comparison, almost two-thirds (64.7 per cent) of the non-aboriginal population in the same age group had a postsecondary qualification.

Canada is the only country around the circumpolar North without a circumpolar university. This means that residents of Yukon, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut seeking a higher education are limited to either attending a territorial college close to home or heading south to a major university.

There are also complex barriers like socioeconomic circumstances, including the added responsibilities that come with a higher percentage of single-parent families. In 2011, 34.4 per cent of aboriginal children 14 and under lived in a single-parent family compared with 17.4 per cent of non-aboriginal children.

These are some of the factors Dechinta founder Erin Freeland Ballantyne and her team thought about while conducting research for the design and development of the program.

"One of the biggest barriers in the North that students and young people identified in why they're not going to postsecondary is that we have kids really young up here," said Dr. Freeland Ballantyne, who was born and raised on Yellowknives Dene First Nations territory and is the first Rhodes Scholar from the Canadian North.

"We have a ton of single moms. And so for women especially, the biggest barrier was, 'I can't afford daycare if I go down south to go to school, and my kids would be out of their cultural context.'"

To address that, the team created "Kids U," a program in which children can learn to read, write and do arithmetic while their parents attend adult classes.

The first seven weeks of each 12-week semester is spent on "campus," a picturesque lodge owned by Dr. Freeland Ballantyne's father. (The lodge serves primarily as a remote getaway destination, popular among tourists hoping to see the Northern Lights and experience the "real" Canada through traditional excursions.)

Land-based activities range from dog mushing and collecting traditional medicines to ice fishing and hunting moose. The program made international headlines in 2011 with a royal visit from Prince William and Catherine, Duke and Duchess of Cambridge. The couple took part in classes, learning about moose-hide tanning, smoking fish and traditional methods of preparing caribou meat.

The remaining five weeks of the semester are spent at home, corresponding with instructors through phone, e-mail and video conference, and completing a community-based project. These projects have included community discussion groups on fracking and water use and an art show to fund-raise for native women's groups.

"It's hard to get an [educational] opportunity like this in Southern Canada because of the way the population has grown, and the way lands are used there," said Cat McGurk, a 20-year-old student in Dechinta's spring 2014 semester.

"When people are interacting with the land – living off of it, dependent on it – that's where a lot of the connection that we talk about comes from. I think it makes relationships that occur on those lands deeper and more meaningful."

Dr. Freeland Ballantyne said an aim of the model is to "build a new generation of leaders and researchers that can walk confidently in both worlds and be change-makers."

Dechinta is funded largely through private foundations, including the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation and the Walter & Duncan Gordon Foundation. It also receives money through the government of the Northwest Territories, from the Departments of Environment and Natural Resources and the Department of Municipal and Community Affairs, as well as charitable donations from private citizens.

Long-term goals include securing stable funding for Dechinta, but also growing the model nationwide, tailoring each school to the land.

"Imagine how incredible that would be, if you could do a semester on Cree territory, and a semester on Haida territory, and a semester on Denedeh," Dr. Freeland Ballantyne said. "What kind of Canadian students would we have then, with all these incredible perspectives and teachings that they could share?"

Cultural resurgence at core of Dechinta studies  
All-women cohort attends fall semester out on the land  
by Meagan Wohlberg

From podcasts and slam poetry to hide tanning and fishing, an all-women cohort at the Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning made cultural resurgence and decolonization the heart of their studies this fall out on the land in the Northwest Territories.

This year's group of 10 graduated from the bush university's fall semester program on the weekend upon flying back to Yellowknife after a seven-week stint at Blachford Lake Lodge, situated north of Great Slave Lake.

While empowerment is the name of the game on the daily at Dechinta, the fact that it was all women, mostly between the ages of 18 and 21, attending this year's course made the dynamic even more powerful, according to participants.

"I don't think I've ever lived this long of a time with a full cohort of women, predominantly indigenous women, so I felt like it was really inspiring to see the things that we can come to and accomplish together, while being out on the land and learning these things for the first time – learning how to cut up fish, dry meat, tan hides and just the everyday workings of the camp," said Tiffany Harrington, 21, a former McGill student who wanted to pursue an education that valued her perspective as an Mi'kmaq-Métis woman.

"It made me really think about gender fluidity and how it's important to kind of challenge gender roles in the fixed state that they're in, because we've proven that we can do everything that men can do here. Having that space to not feel judged or less capable, I think it's really strengthening because you don't have that pressure from people say, 'Oh, I'll do it,'" she said. "There are encounters that I think more critically about now."

Out at Blachford, the students learned to use firearms and hunt, dry fish and meat, tan hides and pick traditional medicines with elders on the land, while learning the theory of cultural revitalization and decolonization in a classroom setting with academic instructors. Assignments throughout saw them engage in creative writing and blogging, podcasts for radio and op-eds for news media.

For many of the women, Dechinta was never the plan, but has now become a life-changing catalyst projecting them onto a road of self-discovery, determination and decolonization.

"I didn't realize how important it was for me to be here until I got here," said Savannah Lantz, 18, of Yellowknife, who enrolled as a first step in furthering her education after high school.

Lantz was initially excited about the prospect of getting away from the city for a while to learn some bush skills, but said the education she gained on the land goes much deeper than how to chop wood and build a fire.

“When I first got here, I didn’t realize how important it was to learn all of these things. I didn’t know what indigenous resurgence meant and I didn’t know what decolonization meant – I didn’t know any of those words,” she said. “So when we started learning about them, it kind of clicked why things are the way they are, why our families are like this and why it’s so hard to live the way we do.

“When I leave, I’m going to leave with a different perspective...I probably won’t be as angry any more about things. I think I’ll be more understanding,” Lantz said.

Others like Kira Anderson, a 21 year-old Quest University student from Vancouver Island, pursued Dechinta with the intent of learning more about her role in the reconciliation process between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples.

“I knew I wasn’t living in integrity being a settler on this land and not having any connections with the First Nations communities where I live, and not knowing what to do about that,” she shared. A professor recommended she go to Dechinta, where the epiphanies, she said, have been powerful and somewhat painful.

“One of the most profound realizations I’ve had since being here is how completely entangled I am in these colonialist webs and behaviours, how comfortable I am in my privileges as a settler and how much I have benefitted from systems of oppression of indigenous people,” Anderson reflected. “I no longer want to do that.”

Dechinta runs regular fall and winter semesters at Blachford, along with short courses in the summer. For more information, visit [www.dechinta.ca](http://www.dechinta.ca).