

A history of the Certificate in Conflict Resolution at the Justice Institute of British Columbia 1983-1993

Dr. Nym Hughes, M.Ed., Ed. D.

INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

The Conflict Resolution Certificate Program was created in the Community Programs branch of the Justice Institute of British Columbia's Educational Services Division in January 1986. It was the first public registration and the first post-secondary program in Canada. By 1990 it was the undisputed leader in conflict resolution training in British Columbia, the Yukon, and all of western Canada. The goal of this doctoral research was to understand how and why the Certificate emerged so successfully where and when it did. It was my hope that lessons learned from the first decade of the Certificate's life might inform its third decade.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What shaped the emergence of conflict resolution as a field of practice?
- What was the inter- relationship between the JIBC educational program in conflict resolution and the field of practice in British Columbia?
- What was the influence of the Certificate's location in a public post-secondary institution, the JIBC?
- What ideas about teaching and learning informed the instructional approaches of the program?
- What ideas about conflict and the resolving of conflict influenced the content of the JIBC conflict resolution education program?

METHODS

This inquiry was historical and interpretive. It was shaped by a narrative inquiry approach and drew on eighteen interviews with Certificate founders and early trainers, archival documents such as JIBC reports and Certificate course manuals, the relevant literature and my own professional experience to create a multi-voiced text telling the story of what facilitated, influenced, informed, and constrained the practice of conflict resolution education at the JIBC between 1983 and 1993.



The first graduating class of the Certificate in Conflict Resolution 1987.

With the formation of a new Conflict Resolution Certificate Program, the first of its kind in Canada, the Justice Institute is responding to the demand for comprehensive training in conflict resolution, anger management, mediation and negotiation skills. (Extension Programs Calendar, January - March 1986, p. 3)

We stepped into a momentum that was gathering and gave it a framework and gave it a voice, and gave it a place to really work. (Joan Balmer, personal interview, January 26, 2007)

KEY FINDINGS:

The Certificate in Conflict Resolution at the Justice Institute of British Columbia was a manifestation of a North American conflict resolution movement that started in the 1970s. Some JIBC institutional characteristics facilitated its emergence: a broad interpretation of the mandate, a high level of divisional autonomy, a culture of educational experimentation and a requirement for generating income. The other crucial factor was the work of two visionary women, Pat Ross and Marje Burdine.

The Certificate's first decade was marked by exponential growth. Its practical content, short course format and highly 'experiential' teaching methodologies contributed to its popularity. Creating enough trainers to teach all the courses was a major project of the first decade and required the new trainers to self-create an identity as mediators, at the same time as 'becoming' conflict resolution educators.

JIBC trainers, administrators and students made substantial contributions to the development of a field of practice provincially and nationally through forming mediator associations, community-based mediation programs and introducing new forms of practice.

Certificate course content was based on ideas from communication, psychology, game theory and organizational relations. By 1991 a JIBC conflict resolution model had coalesced: a perceptual definition of conflict paired with a four-stage resolution process. Other elements were an emphasis on defusing anger in self and others, as well as active listening and assertive speaking skills.

The early years of the Certificate are remembered as a time of excitement, collegiality and creativity. By the early 90s program growth required the hiring of a new generation of trainers, and competition for training days and mediation cases intensified. Collegiality eroded. Core course content, teaching practices and relationship patterns all solidified in the early 90s. This research recommends as a corrective the integration of newer, more contextual theory and practice developments.