

## Brief Encounters with the Taos Institute

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### Tracking the Groundswell: An Emergent Design of Community Engagement

In January 2014, an informal group of community members organized and hosted a community engagement conference called [Groundswell](#). The purpose of the event was to inspire creativity, ideas, and relationships that advance the wellbeing of our community. Approximately 160 people participated, and the event was a great success (you can view a short video, [here](#)). Because the conference was part of a broader [participatory action research project](#), we also took the opportunity to collect as much data as we could, in order to better understand what community members were calling for – particularly in terms of social and economic wellbeing.

Among other things, our [post-conference summary report](#) indicated that people were hungry for more opportunities to come together, contribute to, and create a new reality in our community! With the generosity of the Taos Institute, we acquired a small [grant](#) to help us fund some follow-up activities in order to build on the momentum of *Groundswell* and address some of the challenges identified by community members.

What follows are some of the *lessons learned* in this process of developing and implementing activities with(in) community. For the most part, this learning can be summarized as developing capacities around [emergent design](#). That is, understanding that communities are dynamic systems, we cannot design projects with definitive outcomes. Instead, we have put our energy into designing processes that maximize the potential of this ever-evolving network, inviting and responding to changes as they come:

**Organizational support:** The fact that we are primarily funded by the [Taos Institute](#), which is a relationally-motivated organization, enhances our ability to roll with changing circumstances. Rather than being bound to the projects we outlined in our initial proposal, we are able to explain when and why things change. In this way, our accountability *to the community* remains central, and keeps our activities relevant.

**Strike where the passion's hot:** The ideas for the follow-up activities we are implementing (such as a [bi-monthly column](#) about the links between social and economic wellbeing, a youth-focused [art experience project](#), and an upcoming *Groundswell* conference) all came from community members. Since the knowledge and passion for these activities exists in the community, it makes sense that the leadership for them does too. People who are well-positioned to lead these projects were invited to do so. They have been trusted to take the reins entirely and as a result there is increasing diversity in terms of: the circles of people involved in the projects, the organizations that have decided to partner, the perspectives that make their way in, and opportunities for next, *next* steps for community engagement.

**Keep an ear to the ground:** As mentioned, things have changed since our initial proposal. We had intended to host a listening circle (to enhance relationships and understanding among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people who live in this region, which sits on Tla'amin territory). This didn't unfold due to emerging circumstances, which means we still have the capacity to engage in another activity. Rather than rushing to do *something*, we wanted to be responsive to evolving community needs. As it turns out, a [diversity dialogue](#) was recently hosted by another community organization in response to racist reactions to recent immigration. The report from this dialogue (in which over 60 people participated) identified a number of areas for future action. In line with our mandate as well, we see this emerging call for action as an opportunity to create meaningful partnerships in order to co-create new possibilities in our community on the basis of emerging challenges.

In addition to the lessons highlighted above, this kind of responsiveness requires attention to organization, ongoing communication, self-reflection, and a willingness to *let go*. Excitingly, we are also finding that it generates energy and support for significant transformations in our community, which – in the end – is what emergence is all about.