

Indian Residential School  
History and Dialogue Centre



Functions & Advanced  
Curricular & Research  
Opportunities



## **UBC INDIAN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL HISTORY AND DIALOGUE CENTRE**

### **History**

For more than a century the Canadian government in conjunction with Canadian churches operated a system of residential schools for Indigenous children. The last closed in 1996. Attendance was mandatory and many children, often as young as five, forcibly removed from their families, spent their entire childhoods in the schools. Many experienced significant physical, psychological, and sexual abuse. At times, due to disease, overcrowding, and malnutrition, mortality rates exceeded 65%. The explicit aim of the schools was to provide no more than rudimentary education and to forcibly sever the connection of students to their families and cultures—“to kill the Indian and save the child.” Survivors of this system often were left with severe psychological problems and, unable to return to their communities, many spent years living with alcohol and drug problems. With no experience of functional family life and no way to recover, many who became parents passed their experiences of abuse to their children. The effects on families and communities continue to this day. As early as 1919 government reports documented the poor conditions and effects of the schools, and yet, as a matter of policy, and as Canada endorsed many human rights protocols, the system continued.

For most of this time, information regarding the operation of the schools was heavily suppressed, and in the Canadian educational system well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, very little about the schools, or any other aspect of Indigenous life, was taught. Even in Indigenous communities, many aspects of the operation of the schools is still not widely known: survivors were often ashamed to speak of what had happened to them and others were unwilling to hear, and, having lost their languages, they were unable to communicate with the elders whose traditional role would have been to help them.

Beginning in the 1990s groups of survivors began to speak publicly about their experiences, the settlement to the largest class-action suit in Canadian history brought by former students against the government and the churches, resulted in the formation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, charged with gathering testimony and records, managing restitution processes, and creating broader public awareness and cultural memory. On September 11, 2013, UBC suspended classes so that students and faculty could attend the opening day of one of the TRC major public events in Vancouver. Thousands attended this and other events on campus.

In 2015, the TRC’s mandate ended. The TRC issued a multi-volume Final Report and a set of 94 Calls to Action. As ordered by the settlement, it also established the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation as a repository for its records.

The National Centre was formed following an adjudication of proposals from various institutions. After considerable internal discussion and work with the Indian Residential School Survivors Society and others, UBC supported the bid of the University of Manitoba, with the proviso that it included a acknowledgement of UBC’s intention to establish a west coast centre, autonomous, but affiliated with the National Centre, that would address the needs of west coast communities and have full digital access to NRC records. After years of development, on June 14, 2016, the UBC Board of Governors gave approval for construction to begin. A formal announcement of the

Centre will be made on September 12, 2016, with a projected opening in the 2017-18 academic year.

### **Functions**

A core purpose of the Centre will, of course, be to provide access to TRC and local records to former students of the IRS system, their families, and their communities. A second and equally important function of the Centre will be to provide public information on the history of the schools and other relevant aspects of Canadian and Indigenous history.

The provision of information is vitally important to Indigenous communities, as it is to all Canadians and visitors. It is important for Indigenous people because, even in communities most affected by the schools, the history, and the systemic nature of the IRS system, is not well understood. People live with the consequences, but have often had no way to understand their cause. Present circumstances in many communities may be more effectively addressed if this history is understood.

The information is also important to all Canadians, and to the progress of Canadian society. Many students and visitors come to the university with virtually no understanding of Indigenous history, or any accurate account of this important aspect of Canadian history. The systematic abuses of the Indian residential school system are a troubling aspect of Canadian history, but they are a part of who we are as a nation and important to understand if we are to progress as a society—as many other societies have done by the recognizing the difficult aspects of their past.

Perhaps most crucially, the Centre can help set the stage for future conversations and negotiations that can, finally, happen in a context in which reciprocity is possible, based in a shared understanding of history and mutual respect for one another's circumstances—where the past is not denied and all participants have the knowledge to support informed exchange, and where the joint project of finding a way forward can begin without the impediments of denial and resentment.

### **Partnerships**

Developed in collaboration with the Indian Residential School Survivors Society, the Centre can *only* function, as it has from the start, as a joint project of the university and Indigenous people, communities, and organizations. Those partnerships are already generating new approaches to knowledge and understanding in many parts of the university. The Centre is both a symbol and an enactment of the relationships and commitments that we are now developing, and must continue to develop, in many areas. They lead to a better future, for us as a university, a province, and a nation. But we must work for it—with all the expertise, knowledge, and skill we would bring to any other concern that so deeply affects our prospects.

There is much more to be said and understood about the Centre. Indeed, its purpose is to provide a place and a focus for continuing conversation and thought—about history, about partnerships, and about the potential of relationships across many areas. The work of the Centre is about both research and application, and attached here are descriptions of three areas in which the operations of the Centre will provide leadership and innovation.

## IRSC RESEARCH

In recent years, UBC has progressed from having a conglomeration of individual Indigenous research initiatives, some long-standing and highly respected in Indigenous communities, towards defining a more integrated approach in which larger and more multi-disciplinary projects, firmly rooted in collaborative community-based practices, are better able to advance work at a different level. Collaboratively developed research results in research with a greater relevance and use for communities, and extends knowledge through questions, approaches, and results not attainable by other means.

The IRSC is central to these developments. Many communities remain wary of university research, having been subject to damaging research practices in the past, and they have all had the experience of children going away and not returning from school systems in which their lives and concerns have been of little consequence.

The IRSC is both a frank recognition of that past, and an indication of what we can do and are doing better. By locating an acknowledgement of this important aspect of Indigenous history in the centre of our campus, we are indicating our commitment to a more respectful and equal relationship. By reflecting in the research operations of the Centre the university's commitment to community-driven research partnerships, we will demonstrate the potential for research based in shared imperatives and values. The IRSC supports UBC's collaborative research initiatives by making them—and what they represent—far more visible to everyone.

In addition, the IRSC provides a platform and focus for many kinds of advanced research initiatives. Among them:

1. Indian Residential School History / Canadian History

As materials have been gathered by the TRC and others, many aspects of IRS history, and especially government and church policies and the role of universities, has emerged. The records gathered by the TRC will take many years to fully organize, and the research resulting from them will support historical and social inquiry for many more. This research will necessarily inform research in other areas of Canadian history and social understanding. The Centre will be a place to advance this work, and to support the interaction of scholars across disciplines and institutions, and, through partnerships already established, world-wide.

2. Public History & Uses

Scholarly research in academic history also supports public history—the ways in which, as a society, we use the past to form a context for our present decisions. Thinking about the Indian residential schools as part of our public history is complex, and the many decisions involved have consequences. As many societies before us have learned, they can create a way forward towards a more just and equitable future in which we talk to each other and negotiate our way effectively, or they can result in the entrenchment of inequality, hurt, and blame, leaving us less able to progress.

The IRSC, through its mandate to provide public information and its strategy of using very flexible interactive technology to allow for the functional exploration records and information, has a significant responsibility to undertake discussions with academics, Indigenous communities, and many others, and to determine the most productive ways in which to talk about the past.

And because the design of the Centre's interactive public information allows for rapid adjustment of the ways in which information is made available, scholars and community members will be able to assess its operation and make adjustments to assure that information is accurate and productive for its users—and, in exposing such sensitive and difficult materials, that it does no harm.

### 3. Discourses of Nationhood, Relationship, and Reconciliation

As recent national discussions around reconciliation, occasioned in part by the 2008 Apology in parliament and the 2015 release of the TRC Final Report, have indicated, how societies, governments, and communities think about their relationships affects many policies and processes, sometimes for the better, and sometimes not. Terms such as “reconciliation” play an important role in policy decisions and public support for them, but their operation and meaning are far from simple.

Faculty at UBC and their international partners are already at work in collaborations across disciplinary lines in thinking about these issues and their larger social implications. The Centre will provide a venue sustained focus, viability, and connection between these efforts and many others like them, in both national and international contexts.

### 4. Frameworks for Development, Sustainability, and Health

Many research initiatives, and many public and political discussions, address economic development, and the health and sustainability of Indigenous communities. The current organization of universities supports the development of expertise, and yet for many of these questions to be resolved, experts must talk to each other.

There is increasing demand from communities and from researchers working in the field to develop conversations and frameworks for more integrated approaches. The IRSC will provide a place for those relationships, on campus and off, to form more effectively, and for interactions to continue on a sustained basis.

### 5. The Range of Collaborative Relationships

The work of the past few years has demonstrated the value of defining larger contexts in which people and groups may understand their roles, and see how to link them together. One of the most interesting results is the emergence of new questions and opportunities that would not otherwise be visible. The IRSC provides a focus for the important work that emerges when people have a way to come together, define their common purposes, and act.

## IRSC DATA & INQUIRY

The archives of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada are invaluable materials for understanding Canada's history and learning from the past. Because of the difficult history they address, the many sensitivities surrounding it, and the complexities of managing the many forms in which materials are stored, these records present substantial challenges to our understanding of information and records management—challenges in particular in digital rights, privacy, and accessibility, and in the design of systems that support their functional use. As many forms of historical records are converted to digital form and the generation of new digital records accelerates, these very same questions are emerging across many fields and domains.

Providing access to the IRS records is a national priority. It is also a substantial opportunity for thinking about records and information. The records are extensive and varied, but also form a constrained and circumscribed set. Thinking through all the challenges of assuring their responsible and respectful use, and addressing the challenges of functional access for multiple users, provides an important opportunity for a focused approach to core issues in information management in a highly visible location.

The custody of the records generated and collected by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has been legally entrusted to the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation established at the University of Manitoba. UBC supported this development and was a partner in the successful proposal that established this centre. It has, however, always been part of our intention, and part of their successful proposal, to establish an affiliated centre on the west coast, and to bring the considerable intellectual capital of UBC to the work. We have a unique contribution to make, and the Centre is the platform through which it can be made.

Some research and development imperatives that the IRSC will address:

1. Access and Privacy Controls

UBC, through its Library and its role in national and international initiatives, has leading initiatives in digital access management and security, and extensive platforms for the organization and support of digital records. The development of these systems, however, has generally taken place under the rubric of public information: these systems typically support open access, access by registered UBC users (to satisfy copyright and subscription restrictions), and “dark storage” of materials that are not publicly available.

The records to be managed by the IRSC, however, must support a far more complex system of access controls. Some records contain material, such as descriptions of abuse, that is highly personal and can only be shared with individuals and their families. Some records contain references to third parties who might be adversely affected by their public release. Some materials should only support research under very controlled conditions that ensure the anonymous aggregation of results, and some records, approved for public use, contain material that should not be shown to all audiences, or not shown in circumstances in which mental and emotional health supports are unavailable.

The development of a system that allows for fully-articulated access controls is the only way to work responsibly with these records. Decisions regarding access cannot be the

university's alone, however, but must be done in consultation with those most affected by the events and the records that have been generated. The IRSC must support the development of a very complete and extensive dialogue with communities and affected individuals surrounding issues of privacy and proper use.

Developing such a system, defining its categories and parameters, and working with non-academic partners with the most to gain and lose in the proper management of this information, are critical research tasks to be undertaken by the IRSC, and they will be contributions that UBC will make to the development of many other such systems, addressing information and its respectful and equitable use, for many other purposes and in many other situations around the world.

## 2. Data Diversity

Contending with a multiplicity of data types (text, video, graphics, interactive materials) is a central problem for many data management systems, and many systems have proprietary modes of managing data and providing access. Because of the ways in which the records collected by the TRC or held elsewhere have been generated, those challenges are especially formidable for the IRSC. Many of the records critical to IRSC functions are not held locally, but will be accessed from different remote systems in many places (the National Research Centre in Winnipeg, Libraries and Archives Canada, and many other locations). Managing the articulation between the IRSC system of data organization and access management, and these many other systems will also be a formidable challenge—and an opportunity to generate new research and better approaches to data integration that will benefit many others facing similar circumstances.

## 3. Data Usability

Even the limited set of information relevant to Indian residential school history is far too vast for any one person to fully explore. The final challenge for the IRSC information management system is to provide ways for users of many kinds to navigate information. If our aim were simply to provide a narrative of Indian residential school history, as many have already done, this task would be less challenging. If our aim, rather, is to provide meaningful research access, and to provide many kinds of users with the ability to *explore* records and form their own understanding and conclusions, the task of organizing records, and providing links that allow users to navigate among them, becomes far more complex.

That challenge does, however, open very significant new opportunities, both for pedagogy, as described in the next section, and for thinking about information and how it can work. At the IRSC, this work will have very practical and immediate results—but it will also be primary research addressing very fundamental questions in the information society in which we all participate. By developing this core functionality in such a highly visible location, the IRSC and UBC can bring these very issues into clear and compelling focus—and provide ongoing visibility to developments supporting advanced and advancing work.

## **IRSC CURRICULUM SUPPORT MODEL**

### **The Challenge**

Following the release of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada in 2015, universities across the country have been working to implement curriculum that would better inform all of their students about Indigenous history and contemporary events in Canada.

Indigenous Studies as an academic field is, however, still very much a developing field, and the pool of qualified subject-area experts, in universities and in schools, is still quite small. Staffing a course, or even a set of courses at a large and diverse university such as UBC with qualified expert instructors is unlikely to be possible for quite some time.

### **The IRSC Platform**

The design of the system of public information at the IRSC is innovative. Many students, faculty, staff, and visitors arrive at UBC with no real information about Indigenous history in Canada or Indigenous people. Because they have no information, they often assume that there is none. The IRSC will address that perception by placing visitors in contact, from their first point of entry, with real information—government records, survivor testimony, maps, photos, and other records—that allow visitors to see the vast range of information available, and also to think about the reasons they have never before had access to it.

On site, visitors will interact with information on large interactive wall displays that allow for simultaneous individual exploration or exploration in larger groups. Various items (maps, timelines, photos) will provide entry points, and each of these items will provide links to further opportunities for exploration: visitors can follow threads of information and interest, and redirect their exploration at any time towards other lines of inquiry. Throughout their exploration, they will always be in contact with high-value, primary source information.

Visitors will not be provided with a “master narrative” that provides a packaged overview that tells them what to think, but instead, will be invited to build their own understanding from the information they find and accumulate: there is always a reason to return and learn more, and always a reminder that Indigenous history is not “one story,” but a complex set of experiences that can be understood best through deepening exploration.

### **Class Support**

If an instructor were to visit the Centre with a class, or assign a visit to students as a coursework requirement, students interacting with the Centre’s information would each travel a different pathway through the information. After a period of exploration, they would each have encountered, and, in a sense, “own,” a different part of the story. When the class next meets, the instructor would be in a position to ask students what they had found, and be in a position to assist the class in assembling a larger interpretation based on the pieces that each was able to contribute. While each student would be able to contribute to the formation of the larger interpretation, the interactions of the group

would provide the possibilities of building a more comprehensive view. The identification of missing pieces—areas where the construction of the group interpretation could not be completed due to missing information—could serve as a prompt to further research and investigation.

Notable features of this model:

1. The group interpretation is never complete, but always capable of further development. The “outcome” is not a reductive understanding, but the engagement of students in thinking about a topic they may never have considered before, and realizing that understanding it is a complex but intriguing process of working with information—a process not unlike that they undertake in any other subject.
2. Instructors are not located in the position of a subject-area specialist, but as co-investigators in the group construction of an interpretation. While still having a position of responsibility (maintaining a civil discourse environment in the consideration of challenging and at times contentious information, helping to organize the assembly of views and information into a coherent shape, etc.), instructors can also respond to factual questions beyond their subject-area expertise by identifying them as research challenges for the next class (“what would we need to know to answer that question?”).
3. As the discussion progresses, instructors would also be able to direct the conversation towards the area that *is* their expertise—their disciplinary context (“how does understanding this history lead to more effective interactions in our professional lives as engineers / nurses / political scientists, etc.?”). This approach honours their expertise, and helps to embed Indigenous content into the core of their disciplines.

As instructors became more familiar with both the content and student responses in such discussions, their ability to support more advanced curricula will develop, and, as more Indigenous subject-area experts are recruited to the university, the interactions of those experts with increasingly experienced instructors across the university’s varied disciplinary locations will form a robust network for truly meaningful curricular address in an otherwise very difficult area.

### **Extension**

The specific history of the Indian residential schools is important to understanding the larger history of Canada, but it is also just one among many other aspects of Indigenous history and possible areas of engagement. Units at UBC are already deeply involved in the construction of other projects that can work in similar ways. For example, the *Thunder in our Voices* project, based on the archival records of the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Commission and now being prepared for large screen interactive deployment, operates on a similar model of student engagement and instructor location.

The IRSC model is extensible to a wide range of Indigenous issues, and, potentially, to many other areas of curricular development. The IRSC provides a developmental platform for further exploration of this mixed-mode modality—and for a part of the future of education.