

# Most Significant Change Stories

## First-person accounts of culture shifts at Selkirk College



The evaluation of culture change can be challenging, particularly if you are seeking to influence a particular set of behaviours. Most Significant Change (MSC) Stories is one means for meeting this challenge and gathering qualitative data that can be used to evaluate a program or activity as a whole.

The MSC technique is a form of participatory monitoring and evaluation. It is participatory because many program stakeholders are involved in both deciding the sorts of change to be recorded and analyzing the data. It is a form of monitoring because it occurs throughout the program cycle and provides information to help administrators manage the program.

Participants are invited to tell their stories of the most significant change that occurred. The stories are gathered and vetted through a sequence of evaluators until the “Most Significant Change Story” emerges. This then represents the value or efficacy of the program. The process is meant to be ongoing as new stories emerge.

The following collection of stories arose from the Dinner Basket Conversations (DBC) held at Selkirk College. DBC combine dinner and dialogue in an effort to bring students together over a shared meal and conversation. They are often arranged by a facilitator who brings groceries for communal cooking and a set of questions for sustained discussion. While substance use has been a common theme, other, often sensitive topics, may be broached in this context. Participants have chosen to discuss mental health, sexuality, stress management, etc. Although the impact of the discussion, rather than the content, concerns us most. The stories outlined here have left out any specifying details. What is articulated is the impression left on a particular participant after the conversation has ended.

The names of the participants who contributed their stories has been excluded for the sake of privacy. Their generosity of experience is greatly appreciated as their contributions highlight not only the value of the conversations that took place, but also their individual participation.

## Story 1

### Background

A group of students had contacted RH (via email) saying they wanted to do a DBC. In response, RH put together a basket, buying about \$100 of groceries for these students one Friday evening. This group had never been to a DBC, and there was no 'true' facilitator able to be present. She prepped and encouraged them to use the DBC dialogue guide and questions with respect to the culture of substance use.

### Significant story

She had told them the main guideline was to have a good dinner party, and use the provided questions in the dinner and dialogue guide to focus the discussion. Evaluated through reflection sheets and photos, RH could tell that they had a really rich conversation and that the dinner was a huge success. The photos captured the beautiful and engaging setting that they had created for their DBC to take place. They had decorated using tablecloths and flowers, and served red wine to create a rich environment for conversation and meal preparation.

### Significance

This was significant to RH because the care with which the participants set the tone symbolized

how people can come together through simplistic beauty, conversation and food. It facilitated an open atmosphere for discussion about substance use and truly showed how DBC can create a safe environment for discussion about any potentially sensitive topic. The topic of substance use was embedded in the dinner party through great conversation: "I thought, wow, this really is working." The reflection sheets demonstrated that the students built a true sense of community, told intimate stories and life experiences, and made nutritious foods together. It truly indicated that if students are engaged in a socially supportive environment, and if nutritious food and open conversation about substance use are incorporated, then it is less likely their relationship with substance use will be risky or unhealthy in the future. A healthy relationship with substances is embedded within DBC by establishing trusting relationships, sharing intimate stories, and cooking nutritious foods. This is exactly what the educators hoped for the students. There is a chance that those who participated will put more thought into the choices they make, and develop relationships with other students who they can talk to about those choices.



*The care with which the participants set the tone symbolized how people can come together through simplistic beauty, conversation and food.*

## Story 2

### Background

After the very first DBC facilitated at Selkirk, MH was invited to the “Changing the Culture of Substance Use Summit” in Vancouver, BC. At the time, the event was a highlight for his academic career. He attended alongside other students and one poet, who was there to capture the general discourse of the weekend. This Kootenay cohort attended to present their framework for student well-being. He felt the presentation brought a sense of Kootenay community that displayed Selkirk’s unique approach to student well-being in relation to other institutions. Super rural and Kootenay-esque.

### Significant Story

Many BC campuses were there, and each institution represented their approach to student well-being. For example, Simon Fraser University, a science-focused institution, discussed the need for psychiatric care/ support for students on campus. Other approaches to mental health seemed very academic and professional compared to their approach, using DBC as a guide.

### Significance

He discussed the framework and asked the audience (100+ people) to do a mock-DBC, and discuss their substance use with one another. In a few minutes the exercise elicited engagement and people were discussing their relationships with substances to relative strangers whom they had just met. It was an active way of demonstrating the intervention on a greater provincial level to the many other educational institutions. As an approach representative of Kootenay culture, it was extremely well-received by the audience. The University of Northern British Columbia has now begun having DBC with its sports teams. Thompson Rivers University is now interested in hosting and educating students who live in residence on how to host DBC successfully.

All because MH presented DBC as an effective tool to promote student well-being, and engaged the audience by actively participating themselves to further solidify its value.



*“The exercise elicited engagement and people were discussing their relationships with substances to relative strangers whom they had just met.”*

## Story 3

### Significant Story

A young man, who was familiar with marijuana, participated in a DBC and said that he knew how to use responsibly. He volunteered himself to be a buddy for anyone who wanted to try marijuana for the first time. He spoke of his knowledge of marijuana use and proposed partnering with first-timers so they could have a good experience. He would be the safe person, hanging out and telling them what to expect. He wanted to support people who wanted to try the substance in a safe environment.

### Significance

TM admired this person's dedication and knowledge of creating healthy relationships with substances. She understood that substances are widely used as coping mechanisms; yet, noted that regular use can be unhealthy. She recognized that substances can help relieve stress, but emphasized that things should be done to enable students to make safe choices when using substances. There are many reasons for students to use substances, and DBC

provide opportunities for students to discuss how to have healthy relationships rather than risky ones.

If her family were to use substances, TM would want someone like the young man to be with her family, as he is knowledgeable about the different varieties, experiences, side effects, etc. This opened up a different mindset where TM could talk about substance use openly with her daughter. TM now takes an inquisitive approach to substance use, rather than being judgmental and simply abstaining, as a result of this DBC.

Substance use is a part of campus culture; yet, how do we discuss it safely? TM often observed young people self-medicating as a default coping mechanism and saw DBC as establishing safe environments for students to engage with ideas for healthy substance use. The conversations that took place were very enlightening and exemplified how people can openly discuss subjects of vulnerability. Healthy substance use is a process. Now, it is a matter of how we prepare people to use substances responsibly.



*Substances can help relieve stress, but ... things should be done to enable students to make safe choices when using substances.*

## Story 4

### Background

JK held numerous DBC in her third year, and then advocated for the initiative as a fourth-year participatory action research project. She continued to host many DBC over her third and fourth years as a nursing student, and found a true sense of community was formed during each session. One DBC happened at the Mir Centre for Peace, where students who thoroughly believed in the project were invited to be videotaped, take photos and discuss their personal experiences with substance use. This truly made the night exciting, and created an open atmosphere for communication and connectedness on a deeper level. This video is now found on the Selkirk website as a promotion tool for DBC.

### Significant Story

In contrast to the night she first began her fourth year nursing project, JK previously expressed lack of support from educators and the ethics board due to stigmas around substance use. In trying to promote DBC as useful health initiative, she advocated for the benefits of community conversation, relationship building, and, meal preparation to many people, who had supported abstaining from all substances in prior communication. The emphasis was placed

on the opportunity for mutual, non-judgmental conversation between participants.

### Significance

JK initially had to advocate for the DBC to convince people of their relevance to nursing and of their effect on participant well-being. The bias from educators and the ethics committee came primarily from the fact that DBC are not grounded in scientific evidence. JK's resilience was highlighted through her efforts to market DBC as a beneficial health initiative for students, and through her ability to stand up to authority figures. The resilience of the other students was also recognized as they expressed a desire to continue having DBC because they felt a sense of community and belonging. She felt that the student support she received was substantial in proving that DBC work to change the culture of substance use through a sense of community. Her story brought to light the barriers she encountered, and the stigmas that are apparent in the context of substance use, and highlighted the effectiveness of DBC as a health intervention. Through engagement and positive feedback, she witnessed the increased well-being of student supporters and participants.



*The resilience of the other students was also recognized as they expressed a desire to continue having DBC because they felt a sense of community and belonging.*

## Story 5

### Background

AA learned about the project through her third-year preceptor. She participated in a DBC, alongside her preceptor and a group of nursing students from various cohorts, to discuss substance use, food, mental health, coping and stress management.

### Significant Story

The most significant culture change she perceived was increased comfort of attendees (including herself) with talking about sensitive topics—substance use, relationships with food, and mental health. As the night went on, people appeared to be more at ease, and those who were quieter tended to share more toward the end. In particular, there was a seemingly shy student who was quiet for the entire dinner. She didn't answer any of the discussion

questions until the end, when she told the group where she was from, and what the culture in her family and community was like around topics such as mental health and illness, and substance use. She discussed parties that she attended and how she perceived substance use among her peers and shared her own relationship with substance use.

### Significance

It was apparent that the prior discussion about relationships with substance use made this student feel comfortable enough to share her own insightful opinions and observations. She went from shyly, but kindly, denying to respond to discussion questions or join the ongoing conversation, to responding with great detail, personal reflection and insight.



*The most significant culture change ... was increased comfort of attendees ... with talking about sensitive topics—substance use, relationships with food, and mental health.*

## Story 6

### Background

BR became aware of DBC through the N351 practice placement, working alongside a field guide and another student. She decided to facilitate a DBC to develop a clearer understanding of the research process

### Significant story

She recounted the hosting of a DBC as an amazing experience. All of the guests who participated had very little connection to one another prior to the DBC. Yet everyone was open with one another in regards to their personal experiences with substance use. The sharing that took place amongst the group gave the illusion that these conversations stemmed from long-standing relationships. The dinner discussion had a natural flow and took on a life of its own. This DBC built a sense of community among classmates and expanded social support networks. There was a new feeling of connectedness among this group of people. This was clearly noted within the group reflection sheets.

### Significance

The DBC created an open environment for sharing, one that had not yet been created in their three years working together as nursing students. This process clearly demonstrated how preparing a meal and eating together can provide a vehicle for conversations that otherwise may be difficult to broach.



## Story 7

### Background

CL held a DBC with about seven peers. Tablecloths, music, juice, and spaghetti were the components used to establish an open atmosphere for communication. Their peers were always interested in a free meal, and were very open to problem-solving and conversations aimed at stress relief.

### Significant Story

There is a lot more that goes on beyond what the eye can see. Student stress was clearly expressed, and substance use as a coping mechanism was prominent. Substance use to cope with pain was also prominent, and actively seen as a safe measure. Both healthy and unhealthy relationships

were identified. Some people had recently begun transitioning towards more healthful relationships, while others had left unhealthy behaviours behind.

### Significance

People realized that, despite the stigma of substance use, they could have healthy relationships with substances and experience the benefits of use. The fact that people can choose to use substances to help them feel better in a safe and healthy way was recognized. Conversation about healthy substance use is a significant factor for promoting healthy behaviours. Everyone felt comfortable, and was pleased with the free meal.

## Story 8

### Background

AM became involved with DBC through RH while hosting a wellness booth at the Tenth Street Campus. She eventually hosted a DBC with a focus on sexual health.

### Significant Story

After hosting her DBC, AM was stopped in the hallway by one of the participants. The participant

shared how much she had enjoyed the evening and how it had prompted her to “talk”. This had provided her with a vehicle to talk about sexual health with friends, family, and peers.

### Significance

AM believes that this is the first step in shifting our behaviors regarding sexual health.



*The participant shared how ... [DBC] had prompted her to “talk”. This had provided her with a vehicle to talk about sexual health with friends, family, and peers.*

Published 2017

Healthy Minds | Healthy Campuses is a cross-province Community of Practice managed and coordinated by the Canadian Mental Health Association BC Division on behalf of the BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information. The lead partners for Healthy Minds | Healthy Campuses are the Canadian Mental Health Association BC Division and the Centre for Addictions Research of BC. The BC Partners are funded by BC Mental Health and Substance Use Services, an agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority. The Healthy Minds | Healthy Campuses' Changing the Culture of Substance Use project is funded by the BC Ministry of Health.



**Canadian Mental Health Association**  
British Columbia  
*Mental health for all*



**University of Victoria**

**Centre for Addictions Research of BC**