McMaster Community Based Teaching Portal
Final Report: May, 2016

Project Leads: Dr. Nancy Doubleday, Dr. Jason Brodeur, Joanne Kehoe (in-kind from MIIETL)
Project participants: Sarah Newell, Jamie Counsell, Mackenzie Richardson, Jesse Bettencourt,

With thanks to: Daniel Coleman, Susan Dudley, Dustin Garrick, Judy Major-Girardin, Jim Quinn, Mike Waddington, Peter Self, Grace Pollock, Rodrigo Narro Perez, and Jacob Brodka for feedback.

What was the McMaster Community-Based Teaching Portal project about?
At the outset of the McMaster Community-Based Teaching Portal (MCBTP) project, we identified a number of challenges that are faced by researchers, instructors and students when working on collaborative projects--either within the bounds of McMaster, or in partnerships with participants in the community. Summarized briefly, these challenges related to:

- coordinating projects and information between collaborating individuals or groups;
- enabling equitable access for non-McMaster partners to support collaboration;
- managing, preserving and providing access to data and student products in a sustainable and open fashion; and,
- disseminating the products of student learning and research to the community in a manner that is engaging and meaningful.

Over the course of the project, we worked with student collaborators to develop product requirements and build a working, web-based prototype for the MCBTP. Using a Wordpress platform with a number of embedded file-sharing, communication and productivity tools, the MCBTP prototype allows groups to work in a collaborative space that centralizes their information, and provides them the ability to share selected information openly with the public. The MCBTP includes the following collaboration- and workflow-enabling tools:

- Google Drive for file sharing and synchronous document collaboration
- Dropbox for file sharing
- Google Calendar for event management and notification
- Trello for project management and task tracking
- Disqus for commenting and feedback.
In addition, a graduate student, Sarah Newell (Health Policy) has contributed by developing a user manual for the beta version of the MCBTP. In December, Sarah presented at ArcticNet in Vancouver to share the work to date with possible users.

How did the activity enhance the competence and effectiveness of individuals (or others) with respect to teaching, research, service and/or leadership?

The beta-version of the MCBTP has provided a basis for discussion of the nature of collaboration and the of equitable relationships in research. While the slow progress toward a user-friendly beta-version has delayed opportunities for full adaptation of the MCBTP by user groups, it has led to a number of important outcomes in shaping the context. Above all, developing the Portal has created an opportunity for important conversations around the challenges associated with: a) coordinating projects between multiple users, b) ensuring that information is stored and shared appropriately, c) equitable partnerships, with access and benefits sharing, and d) communicating results effectively and in a timely manner to interested parties in the community (where applicable).

It is our hope that at the very least, these discussions have increased awareness of these concerns among faculty, students and staff issues, and may trigger reflection in the context of partnerships and action to address any issues—whether using tools available through the Portal or not.

What have been the results of your evaluation of the quality of the expected development and its potential impact?

Throughout the MCBTP development, we met on an "as-needed" basis to assess the effectiveness of the product through a combination of self- and external-evaluation. External evaluation was carried on an opportunistic basis, including discussions with the McMarsh committee, representatives of Environment Hamilton, the Culture of Peace Hamilton. The ArcticNet meeting was our first presentation to a large research community with strong community-based commitments.

This process has resulted in a number of important realizations and recommendations:

- The technical challenges associated with developing and maintaining this prototype are significant; a considerable amount of technical skill and time commitment will be required to maintain its functionality in the medium- to long-term. While these requirements have been supported by the Project Team, with the resources of Forward with Integrity, work should be done to consider transitioning to a sustainable relationship with the Community Engagement Strategy and to plan for long-term deliverables from this project.
- The MCBTP prototype is not likely to be a solution for all groups; many groups (and particularly those with long-established communication
preferences) will be less inclined to commit to the significant changes presented by the Portal. In order to maximize a return on activities, the Project Team should focus on newly-developed and developing groups--working with them to develop plans for information exchange and dissemination, for which the Portal may be a practical resource.

To address this recommendation, the Project Team has created the MCBTP user guide to assist with implementation, which provides information for groups administrators and users alike.

While the Portal's target audience may be newly-formed groups, the pre-packaging and integration of these these featured tools within the Portal--which can be used more-or-less for free by groups outside of the Portal--still offer significant benefits for these users. This justifies a commitment, going forward, to develop a plan for communicating value and providing self-directed learning and facilitated instruction for these groups.

How have you communicated and disseminated the insights gained with peers and broader McMaster communities?

Although we have not identified a major opportunity to share the MCBTP with the campus as a whole, we are currently in discussion with the Community Engagement coordination team, and expect there maybe an appropriate venue for a public launch in the 2016 fall term.

As mentioned, we presented the MCBTP project to Arctic Net in Vancouver in December 2015, (Arctic Net is a large conference where northern researchers and community members gather annually), to test the interest among researchers beyond McMaster and community members outside Hamilton, using our work with the Ocean Canada Partnership as an example.

How will the outcomes of the project be sustained or expanded?

Recognizing that the existing web-based MCBTP is a working prototype that is useful in its current state, but possesses an uncertain lifespan in terms of the longevity of its components, we have adopted a divergent strategy to explore applications, maintain functionality and examine values associated with further use and development:

Applications of the MCBTP in research project planning and implementation will be explored in Sarah Newell's doctoral research, in relation to its potential use in coordination and communication with and between her study groups.

Project leads will continue to seek new groups and projects to engage, such as the planning process for development of the HOPE Institute.

Where feasible and reasonable, the project leads will continue to perform regular maintenance and upgrades on the MCBTP, to extend its functional lifetime; and,

As part of an effort to increase the number of engaged groups, the project team will begin activities aimed at providing information and instruction on
how some of the tools featured in the MCBTP could be integrated into groups’ practices, in order to assist with information sharing, project management and dissemination with partner communities.

- Recognizing that the Portal may have a limited lifespan and will not suit the needs of all user groups, we feel that the underlying principles of respectful community engagement rooted in equitable access to resources like the Portal is an important contribution to the discourse. Practically there is real value that can be shared with potential users by facilitating access through self-directed learning materials, including the user manual, and working with community and academic researchers to incorporate one or a number of the services offered in the Portal (e.g. Google Drive, Trello, etc.) into their current practices. The next round of Community Engagement discussions related to the release of the Strategic Plan next week offers an opportunity to create new interfaces with existing Forward with Integrity commitments.

Please outline any barriers or challenges that may have prevented you from achieving some of your project goals?
In addition to the technical challenges that were anticipated at the outset of the project, in the end we have all acknowledged that changing previously-established communication modes is a long-term process, requiring much more than just a web platform to enable it: Facilitating adaptation of new approaches and tools requires careful and persistent communication, promotion, and the establishment of ‘champions’ within a selected group. Our continuing project work (outlined above) reflects this acknowledgement, and we look forward to working with potential users in the context of on-going university activities and FWI commitments, to integrate these tools and solutions into a workflow that complements their existing practices.

Though it was in no way a significant hindrance to the project and its outcomes, the timing of the grant award (June) posed a bit of a challenge: For projects such as this where the ideal arrangement is to employ a full-time summer student to focus on development work, grants would most desirably awarded early in the year, to allow for ample recruitment time.

Conclusion
On behalf of all project participants, we would like to express our thanks to the FWI project funding program, as well as all of our collaborators for their time and support with this initiative.

In recognition of the spirit and principle of equitable collaboration and access, we would like to mark the end of this development phase and the transition into the broader community with a formal change of name of the project to the "Community-Based Teaching Portal" (CBTP).

Thank you so much for this opportunity, and for the support of Forward with Integrity.
Sincerely,

Dr. Nancy Doubleday, Dr. Jason Brodeur, Joanne Kehoe