

## **A local case of global learning: critical reflections on leadership education for international community development practitioners**

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The Coady International Institute works with development practitioners to enhance communities' knowledge, skills and capacity in the Global South. This is done through education programs, action research, and in-field work with specific partners. We bring to this study our interests and struggles with the concept of partnership, transformative learning and leadership for community-based action. Drawing from critical theories of learning in a globalized world and adult education's renewed call for social justice, we analyse the struggles of working in a setting that deals daily with the tensions of how knowledge is constructed collaboratively among participants and facilitators from diverse geographic and educational backgrounds. We consider how we and our participants bridge so called western and non-western concepts of learning. As equitable development requires intentional collaboration among diverse partners, we examine how a new course on *Partnerships in Multi-stakeholder Environments* mirrors our reflections on learning in a collaborative and complex environment. We also integrate observations from an existing research methods course and the library's participation in programming.

### **Context**

The Coady International Institute is rooted in the Antigonish Movement, a social and economic justice movement in Eastern Canada originating with the Extension Department of St. Francis Xavier University (St.FX). The movement brought together two development models popular at the time, adult education and economic co-operation. Collective activities beginning with mass meetings and study clubs, through to various forms of co-operative organizing led people to identify the obstacles they faced, the resources they could build upon, and the strategies they could employ to confront injustice. The Institute was established in 1959 to respond to international demand for education programs on the movement's collective learning and organizing models at the same time as concepts of international development and human rights were emerging. Thus, the principles guiding the work of Coady integrated both the principles of our own movement, as well as those of the emerging Gandhian, Freirean, African humanist, feminist and ecological social

movements (Bean and MacDonald, 1992). Today, our work also integrates issues tied to globalization, sustainability, democratic citizenship and engagement. Coady has worked to respond to international social and economic changes, while at the same time preserving our mission of working with grassroots organizations in the Global South.

Each year Coady offers, in addition to a range of short certificate courses, a comprehensive 19-week residential Diploma in Development Leadership program for 50-60 development practitioners primarily from the Global South who are offered scholarships to attend according to their experience and the work of their organization. They represent community groups, civil society organizations, NGOs, and social movements; or intermediary organizations such as international NGOs, donor or government agencies. Bean and MacDonald (1992) spoke of our balance of working within a university and in community-based development: 'Our training purpose is, of course, the formation of development practitioners, not academics, and consequently our rigor is in terms of both analysis and application' (p.17). The range of experience among participants contributes to a program that is designed to facilitate analysis through that experience and find commonalities upon which to develop applicable responses. The program begins with an intensive four-week 'foundations institute' to explore concepts of transformative adult education and leadership integrating individual and collective reflection on their own path of learning and leadership. This is followed by fifteen weeks of elective courses that encompass a range of community development related topics.

In response to the increasingly complex environment in which our students practice, a new course on *Partnerships in Multi-Stakeholder Environments* was created in 2010. This course was designed to explore the dynamics of working in partnership. Although widely recognized as essential, partnership is complicated by competing or conflicting interests, intricate political socio-economic situations, and differing principles and approaches. Intentional collaboration to meet mutual goals in a multi-stakeholder environment is a crucial element of development work. This course aimed to identify, analyse and explore: the key elements of the complexities of collaboration; the skills required for assessing, managing, facilitating and negotiating in multi-party stakeholder settings; and direct application of collaboration and partnerships to participants' own development practice.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Critical, postmodern and postcolonial theories are influencing adult educators to examine and challenge dominant western concepts of education, leading to a strengthened understanding of indigenous and other non-western knowledge and learning forms (Merriam and Associates 2007). At our institute that brings together practitioners from a wide range of educational backgrounds these dynamics vividly play out, though not in easily predictable ways. Notably, many non-western participants bring very western educational experiences and expectations of

knowledge and expertise. The limitations of dividing learning models into western or non-western categories are quickly revealed. Such dynamics are magnified by the broader context of development work in an increasingly complex socio-political 'multi-stakeholder' environment, where communities contend with unclear structures and relationships of power. Community leaders and adult educators face the additional challenge of funding their work, and responding to the demands of financial accountability and impact. This is a stark reality for Coady as we require continuous funding in order to offer scholarships to those who otherwise would not be able to attend our programs. Educational policies shaped by state or market-led ideologies (Tett 2010) can potentially challenge community values, and 'evidenced-based' priorities are re-asserting the prominence of positivism after decades of the growing recognition of diversity and subjective positions in university contexts (West 2010).

Merriam, Courteney and Cervero (2006) highlight elements of learning in a globalized context that initially seem obvious to community-based adult educators, but that apparently require repeating and reinvigorating. How elements such as creating space are enacted in our program help us assess what supports breakthroughs in transformative learning, and where the challenges persist. Policy and partnership strategies identified by Merriam, Courteney and Cervero are reminders of the need for educators to continue to push beyond the classroom when challenging forces that undermine educational models that seek to redress deeply ingrained injustices. 'Adult education is at its most effective when it forms alliances with other people, agencies, and institutions with similar goals and objectives... Forging partnerships has many advantages and few drawbacks' (p. 493). Yet, drawbacks do exist and need to be understood so their impact is minimized. The use of power in partnership and how we are 'disciplined' in these partnerships (Irving and English 2008) are issues that are often perilously overlooked or actively suppressed in the spirit of collaboration.

Two models of learning together are particularly relevant to the multifaceted context of our education programs. Preskill and Brookfield (2009) take issue with prevalent management discourses of leadership, and propose a leadership learning model that is attentive to the collaboration and engagement that we see is necessary for effective leadership for social change both in communities and through international networks. Preskill and Brookfield's (2009) model of learning leadership helps inform the social justice context of our work, while Pettit's (2010) 'multiple faces of learning and power' is useful to uncover the complex dynamics both in the classroom and at the broader level. Preskill and Brookfield argue vigorously that learning is central to leadership for social justice. The work of partnership and collaboration cannot be discussed without a careful exploration of power. Pettit (2010) notes the growing recognition of the need to study issues of power in development work yet he adds that superficial analyses do little to contribute to any meaningful understanding. Pettit responds that 'multiple faces of power call for multiple faces of learning and

capacity' (p 26). Pettit utilizes a range of transformative adult education practices, combining both practical and creative methods, to facilitate greater understanding of the complexity and impact of power.

The data for our analysis are derived from program evaluations and critical reflections of our practice. The focus is primarily on one course with additional reflections in related contexts of the library and research methods at Coady. The intention here is not to provide definitive prescriptions, but invite discussion on issues of partnership, research and collaboration both in the classroom and in the community that requires constant interrogation.

From a 'learning for leading' viewpoint, Preskill and Brookfield (2009) argue that the practice of critical reflection is a process that enables people to act with agency—the ability to challenge power and make change. From this perspective we have identified a couple of tensions to be examined further—both on the micro and macro level—in order to improve our practice. The micro is our actual educational program and setting, the participants and facilitators; the macro is on two interconnected levels: the Institute itself as well as the international arena in which we and our participants operate. Tensions are inevitable, providing not only direction and focus but also a creative push and pull of resources, ideologies, and competing notions of learning for change. As with most tensions it is a balancing act and we begin a preliminary exploration of a couple.

### **Analysis**

The newly developed Partnerships course was designed as a microcosm on how to learn collaboratively *about* collaboration and partnerships. First offered in November 2010, the course was co-designed by facilitators from different development backgrounds and attended by 12 participants from 7 countries associated with a range of community organizations: international agencies; social movements; faith based civil society groups; northern donors and the private sector. The one week course began with sharing each participant's partnership experiences—examining commonalities and lessons learned. We then explored successful and not-so-successful international case-studies of cross-sector collaboration, questioning the intent and purpose of partnerships to better understand the importance of ethical frameworks and power dynamics. With an emphasis on prevention we then identified tools and approaches to partnership conflict resolution. The course ended with reflections on immediate application to each participant's current work. The course mark was based on a combination of self-and peer assessment along with a critical analysis on which of the course learnings could be best applied to either participants' existing partnerships or their development of new partnership strategies. As a result students were actively engaged from the beginning and by the end were reflecting on direct practical application.

Overall the course was assessed highly as being participatory, relevant to learners' contexts, and a positive learning environment with an appropriate mix of

methodology that balanced existing experience with new insight and tools (90% satisfaction on student evaluations). As a result of participants' recommendations aligning with organizational priorities, the course will once again be offered as part of the 2011 Diploma but also re-designed into a stand-alone 2-3 week certificate for offer in 2012. This provides a timely opportunity for facilitators to critically reflect upon course methodology and intentional design—this paper being part of that initial process.

### ***The micro push and pull of diversity and commonality***

Building on the Coady diploma program's introductory foundations, subsequent courses attempt to build on the diversity for discussion and learning. This was particularly true of the Partnerships course. Far from being an impediment this diversity resulted in creative examination of the traditional notions of partnership as service provision or funding. In the final course evaluation over 75% of the participants wrote some variation on the following quote: 'The case studies and sharing of learning from each other has widened my understanding of partnership. Most significant learnings involve better understanding of the identification & selection of partners, the (inter-sectoral) scope of partnership possibilities and the ethics and power within partnership relationships.' However we speculate if this would have been the case had the course been earlier in the Diploma program when relationships and trust were just being established. This is an important consideration for the new stand-alone certificate where participants will meet for the first time at the beginning of the course.

The Partnerships course was co-designed by two very different facilitators: one with extensive microfinance, private sector experience, the other from a community development, adult education background. While these differing perspectives occasionally posed a challenge in course design, it was a strength in classroom discussion where a shared commitment to exploring the power dynamics involved with collaboration over-rode any specific sectoral experience. We were challenged to respect each other's professional experience and recognized that the differences we resolved working together were a microcosm of what we were encouraging participants to examine: the 'added value' of working in partnership and the recognition that truly mutual beneficial cross sector partnerships are a more effective way to challenge development issues at a community level. Playing out the negotiations of co-facilitation in this context is instructive for application of the very concepts of partnership.

As noted at last year's conference (Irving 2010) libraries are reviving discussions of their roles in adult learning, both in terms of the activities and use of the physical space, such as 'learning commons.' In conjunction with the Communications for Development course, role plays on 'information activism' are conducted in the library which illustrates the importance of access to information for activists, the roles that libraries can play to facilitate or impede people's access to information that they

require. Our participants, as adult learners, bring an equally varied background of experiences on library rules and practices and stereotypes. Participants often describe libraries with locked cabinets or impenetrable membership requirements. They quickly begin joking about our 'rules free' library. Among Canadian and international adult learners, there are barriers to be broken down to facilitate the adult learning environment that is necessary in our program if the library is to be an extension of the classroom. While the average diploma participant annually borrows twice as many books at our library as the StFX undergraduates at the larger university library (this comparative statistic has remained consistent despite the expansion of electronic access), a small group of Coady participants each year rarely use the library, despite the extensive research component of several courses. It can be surmised those barriers don't break down for them. The advent of ever-expanding electronic resources can add extra layers of intimidation by the mass of information available, matched with the frustration of not being able to find what is relevant to their goals. The critical analysis skills developed in the foundations do not automatically transfer to critical analysis of library resources or websites. In the upcoming diploma program more specific programming will be developed within the foundations block to see if this can help.

### ***Bridging micro and macro conditions and expectations***

The focus on transformative learning is often a very new and exciting approach for participants for although 95% of our students are from the Global South, they are usually graduates of a western-influenced education system which has not encouraged critical thinking. Yet as they progress to the topical elective courses, there is a tension between trusting in participatory adult learning processes versus the need to return home with what they perceive as practical, applicable skills. This raises the question of 'transfer of learning' for us as pedagogues (Brookfield, 2005), as noted in the previous paragraph. While we are committed to adult education approaches we have uncertain success in longer-term transformation of participants' worldviews so that they see links between Freire and the everyday world in which they operate. We need to examine our courses more deeply to ensure a closer look at the real world context of the participants and the reality of their learning needs. In the Partnerships course we attempted to balance this with initial exploration of personal experience with partnerships and power relations followed by international case studies and then reflections on immediate application of the newly learned approaches, ethics, models and tools.

A key aspect of the course was the examination of power relations in partnership in relation to funding partnerships ("those who pay the bills set the rules") and decision-making. By exploring ethical frameworks and identifying differing ways to value partners contributions, participants were able to reexamine their own sense of powerlessness—both personally and professionally—and learn new methods to identify ways in which power could be taken back as an active partner in a working or funding relationship. Immediate course evaluations indicated that this aspect was

key (“great course that opened my mind to new ways of looking at partnerships, power within them and tools to navigate”) however it would be useful to follow-up with participants to track those most significant learnings—the personal transformation or the professional application or a balance of the two.

Another example is the research methods course which closely follows the participants’ introduction to transformative adult education and participatory development concepts. Yet, they enter the research methods class expecting to learn skills in ‘traditional’ (western) research, returning to habituated (Pettit 2010) views and values of valid knowledge—in other words, maintaining assumptions of positivist, quantitative methods being more valid and accurate (no matter how badly done) than qualitative, participatory methods (no matter how rigorous and well designed). As Pettit (2010) notes, ingrained values of habituation are hard to overcome. Our program has to address the uneasy situation of breaking down those habits of mind at the same time as acknowledging the very real—and increasingly stringent—externally imposed evaluation criteria for funding. As much as we wish to push back with transformative learning and participatory research, we are also confronted with those externally prescribed values that Tett (2010) flags.

Interestingly within the research methods class, a shift occurs when discussions of past research experience reveals participants’ frustrations of being part of research projects in which they were implementing studies designed by others. Speaking of communities’ ‘research fatigue’ begins to elicit insights on how research could be done differently. The external context of researching in other peoples’ interests and not their own begins to change their thinking from looking at tools to do research ‘better’ to looking at ways to identify the research priorities of their communities and how they can develop relevant projects.

At the macro level it is an institutional challenge for us to balance learning with results. We need donors to provide scholarships, which require strategic funding partnerships in an increasingly results-based world. While we strive to identify funders who are *bonafide* enablers of growth and progress we come up against complex ethical and market forces requiring constant review and careful decisions. In the Partnerships course, we used examples of our own institutional funding partnership challenges—how best to find programming synergy and fit with donors—which was a valuable insight for participants and a chance for us to explore from a pedagogical perspective. A related institutional challenge is the increasing need to show results on how our programs have resulted in positive change at organizational, community and international levels. There are many logical and not-so-logical frameworks available and we currently strive to identify evaluation methods that go beyond the quantitative and technical.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The development of a course on partnerships and collaboration led us to reflect on our own styles of collaboration and the partnerships we choose institutionally. In our

hybrid role as an adult education institution working in the development sector, the current multi-stakeholder environment challenges us to promote intentionally collaborative, critically reflexive, and potentially transformative community leadership education balanced with the application of practical, measurable skills and outcomes. Our continued challenge also is to find measurable ways to justify the central importance of transformative learning and to find ways to ensure its continued funding and support.

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