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Communities of Lifelong Learning: Social Justice and Social Territories

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Abstract: *Under the larger umbrella of “communities of lifelong learning,” in this paper we explore the themes of social justice and social territories building on our particular professional and academic experiences. Shauna discusses her experiences with a partnership project with a Filipino women’s organization, and Tom draws on his interest in program planning, and offers some observations and reflective questions about how these changes may influence our practice.*

Community Based Research and Social Change (Shauna)

From 2006 to 2009, the National Alliance of Philippine Women in Canada (NAPWC) an organization formed in 2002, conducted a federally funded Canadian project entitled *Filipino Community and Beyond: Towards Full Participation in a Multicultural Canada*. The intent of the project was to build capacity in the Filipino community to address four issues: economic marginalization, violence against women, racism, and the alienation of youth. At the core of the project was community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) which generated knowledge and insight into the lived reality of marginalization which then informed various popular education processes that often included the use of various visual arts (painting, theatre). These activities also contributed to various forms of policy and media engagement.

My description and analysis of this project represents a particular view. As Linda Alcoff (1991) argues, the location of the speaker always has epistemic significance, so who I am, the one listening, considering the data, and making judgments matters. I was invited to take up the role of external evaluator (a requirement of the funders) by the leaders of the NAPWC who wanted my perspective to inform their project and the formative and summative evaluation. I met with the project’s steering committee at the beginning of the project and several times throughout, attended all the national consultations, read all reports, and examined many artifacts (videos, visual art) created during the project. To my role I brought my sensibilities and experiences as a feminist adult educator whose academic studies have focused on women’s learning within social movements and in the workplace; I also bring art-based processes to both my research and teaching. In my relationship with this project I shared the organizers’ passion for social justice, and like them, I have been involved with feminist organizations whose advocacy efforts were directed at changing policy. As a member of what critical race scholar Sherene Razack (1998) calls a “white settler society,” however, I am differently located in hierarchies of class and cultural privilege. “To reach each other across our differences or to resist patriarchal and racist constructs, we must overcome at least one difficulty: the difference in position between the teller and the listener, between telling the tale and hearing it” (Razack, 1998, p. 36). In the Canadian context, the process of racialization of some groups means that I am rarely asked or required to recount my ancestry (“Where you from?”). It is assumed because of my white skin that I am *not* an immigrant, that I am “Canadian,” but what is erased in these moments of (mis)recognition is my own immigration history and that of all who live in Canada, with the exception of the First Peoples, aboriginal nations that were of this land for thousands of years before colonization. My mother’s working class family immigrated to Canada from

Scotland in the 1920s. Like many other immigrants (including those from the Philippines), they left a difficult economic situation hoping for better opportunities. My grandfather faced some downward mobility and deskilling processes, but as a white-skinned European, he did not encounter the structural and everyday discrimination that the Filipino community encounters. It is interesting to note that when both of my parents, at the end of their lives, ended up living in care homes, the majority of their care givers were Filipino nurses who treated them like they were their parents. I am indebted to them for their care and compassion. So this partnership with the NAPWC is not only an academic one but also resonates at a personal level.

Let me briefly outline the kinds of struggles and larger context facing Filipino Canadians. The population of the Philippines is now over 80 million, ruled by an elite minority. Twenty percent are landowners while the remaining live in states of feudalism. The ongoing struggle of colonization creates significant deprivation for many Filipinos who migrate to other countries seeking better employment prospects. Indeed the export of Filipino workers to other countries is a key economic strategy of the Filipino government. In Canada, Filipinos comprise the fourth largest immigrant group in Canada (now over 400,000) located mainly in Canada's major cities and suburbs of Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, Winnipeg, Edmonton, Calgary and Vancouver. In the last decade, the population has grown significantly (31% since 1996). Furthermore the Philippines is now the main source country of immigrants to Canada. They are among the highest and most educated of immigrants, have the highest rate of employment among immigrant groups, but despite this, they are trapped at the bottom end of an economic and labour market hierarchy. The feminization of their poverty struggles is a significant dimension of their migrant experiences around the world and in Canada. Most Filipinos in Canada are women (65%); the result of significant policy shifts. Until the early 1970s, Canada recruited Filipino women to work as nurses (like those who cared for my parents), teachers and in other professions identified as facing a skilled labour shortage. Most of those who immigrated during that era were able to achieve economic security as their foreign education and training were recognized. The economic trajectories of Filipino immigrants changed dramatically with the introduction of foreign worker policies programs beginning in the 1980s. In 1981 the Foreign Domestic Movement (FDM) program was established. This was replaced in 1992 by the Live-in Caregiver Program (LCP). Since its inception, the program has grown substantively with 4,000 Filipinos (mostly women) arriving in 1994 and 22,000 in 2006. Critics of the program argue that the growth of the LCP is related to the failure of the Canadian federal government to support a publicly funded national childcare program. They also point to the cuts in programs and services for the elderly and those with disabilities.

Under the LCP, Filipino domestic workers are given *temporary* work visas; furthermore, they cannot bring their children and they are not allowed to take training or undertake any upgrading during the first two years of working. They must live with their employers (leaving them vulnerable to abuse). The economic struggles in the Philippines push workers to enter these programs; many women must leave the Philippines and the care of their children with extended family. The families in the Philippines face the same struggles and are reliant on the monies (remittances) the domestic workers send to them. The export of Filipino workers has generated a whole industry of immigration consultants, domestic worker recruitment agencies, and remittance services in the Philippines and elsewhere. Further problems are encountered when Filipino domestic workers apply for landed immigration status and when they bring their children to Canada, many of whom had not been living with their mothers for several years. These children also face discrimination in the school system and many drop out, finding work in

low paid service sector to help supplement their mothers meager incomes. The NAPWC project sought to address problems emanating from such racist and sexist policies which have contributed to the structural economic and racial marginalization of the Filipino community.

In my assessment of the project, it became clear that a key component of their mobilizing and politicization development was CBPAR and the use of visual and performance arts. In the limitations of this paper, I cannot do justice to this work and can only give a hint of how powerful these activities were. Through multiple town hall meetings, study circles, and focus groups (which mainly occurred in Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal), the specific ways that policy and other factors operate to maintain the Filipino community's social and economic marginalization were revealed. At one of the national consultations, a young man spoke about his alienation from his mother; for four years (when she was in Canada and he stayed with his grandparents in the Philippines) she was only a disembodied voice on the phone. When he came to Canada he was estranged from his mother and faced racism in school. He dropped out before completing grade twelve and started working in a low income job. Through his participation in study circles, he came to realize how his estranged relationship with his mother and his marginalization in the school and labour market system was the result of long standing structural oppression. This struggle of Filipino youth was powerfully portrayed in *Pinoyville*, a popular theatre play developed in Montreal. Another art project was the construction of a dress, resembling in many ways the metal armor worn by soldiers in battles of the Middle Ages. It was made with hundreds and hundreds of phone cards linked together with metal circles. The phone cards were given to the project by Filipino domestic workers who had purchased these phone cards in their effort to stay connected to their families (if they leave Canada when they have only temporary work visas, they are not allowed back in; furthermore they cannot afford the air fare to return home). This dress, which was also a beautiful piece of art, portrayed in simple and shocking ways how these mothers were trapped in a net created by economic greed and sexist and racist migrant worker policies.

These examples are only a few of many that illustrated how PAR "is a proposal for action that focuses on transformed understandings of the creation of knowledge among human beings" (Hall, 2001, p. 178). This also illustrates the power of PAR as argued by Orlando Fals Borda (2001) who asks 'how can we privilege the production of responsible knowledge so that the common peoples who have been victims of capitalist exploitation and abuse become the main recipients and beneficiaries of research?' (p. 33). Dialogue, as Freire (1970) has pointed out, is also key to transformation of social injustices: "Dialogue is an encounter between men and women who name the world, it must not be a situation where some name on behalf of others. It is an act of creation; it must not serve as a crafty instrument for the domination of one person by another" (p. 89). The NAPWC project created spaces and mechanisms for dialogue, for a kind of "counterstorytelling," a process in Critical Race Theory (CRT) which names the lived reality of oppressed peoples and how institutions serve the interests of power (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995). Similarly, Fraser (2007) has noted that the struggle for social justice is not just about "how," but also about "who." She argues for the "all-affected principle" which "holds that all those affected by a given social structure or institution have moral standing as subjects of justice in relation to it" (p. 25). Within globalization, it is not geographical proximity that creates fellow subjects of justice, rather it is their links to a common structural oppression. This proximity to structural oppression is what links many Filipino feminist activists around the world who struggle to disrupt and name those injustices.

Social Territories and Boundaries (Tom)

I began my career as an adult educator in 1970 as a university conference coordinator. My job was to work with outside groups and university departments to support the educational, social and organizational objectives behind the hosting of a conference. The “social territory” of each conference was pretty clear. It was largely bounded by the dates of the conference (the temporal) and its physical location on campus (the spatial). Of course, such “boundaries” were always illusory because the relationships between people and the dynamics set in motion in the social space of a short conference could not — and should not — be confined. In fact, most conference planners are thrilled when they hear that a short-term event has nurtured relationships, provoked insights, or led to meaningful action. About the most we can expect from short-term programs is to provoke thought and action with the hope of desirable outcomes down the road.

The adult education “methods” I learned about early in my career were accompanied by diagrams of furniture arrangements indicating the “preferred” spatial relationships between and among the learners and subject matter experts. The arrangement of furniture was intended to facilitate the kind of interaction — represented by arrows on the diagrams — the event was designed to promote, which presumably was related to the objectives of the event organizers. When I enter a meeting room even today, I still experience a chronic compulsion to rearrange the furniture so it matches my notion of what the meeting is supposed to be about.

In 2010, these notions of spatial and temporal boundaries of learning seem, at best, quaint. Of course, there has been a long tradition of “distance education” and “independent study” in adult education that has never relied on physical and temporal proximity of learners and teachers. But the early incarnations of these served relatively small numbers of learners whose circumstances made attending face-to-face programs difficult or impossible. Not only that, but for decades we have also known the extent to which adult learners engage in “learning projects” they organize and conduct themselves, often without direct involvement of teachers or participation in any formal “program.” Learners conduct these projects on their own terms, locate whatever resources they need to achieve their personal objectives, and involve whoever they wish in the process.

Digital technologies are transforming/disrupting the conventional social spaces and boundaries of adult learning:

There are new generations of adult learners who know little of the predigital world. They listen to i-Pods, watch videos on YouTube, IM their friends, socialize on Facebook, journal on Blogspot, learn on Moodle, search on Google, consult wikis, get their news via RSS feeds, network on LinkedIn, meet mates on e-Harmony, and buy stuff on e-Bay. They have only known a digital world, and they expect learning experiences that incorporate that world. (Sork, 2010, p. 158)

Although there remains a “digital divide” that separates those who can participate in this digital world from those who cannot, technologies are increasing access to learning resources and to virtual social spaces where new learning communities can be formed, nurtured and dissolved. The potential of these technologies to further democratize learning is balanced by serious political, cultural, ethical and economic concerns.

The promise of these technologies to further democratize learning is found in the “wide-open” nature of the Web. Anyone with a minimum of hardware and knowledge of technology can become a “publisher,” develop a following, and form a virtual learning community. Time

and space become irrelevant factors in a world where learners have instant access to information and commentary at whatever depth and level of sophistication they choose. They can use this technology to gather information, develop skills, debate issues, solicit feedback, form networks, offer critical analysis, and organize action. All of these are time-honored activities in adult education. Although technology has eliminated many of the situational and institutional barriers that have historically prevented engagement, it has also introduced new forms of exclusion.

So what are we to make of this shifting landscape of adult education in an era where “lifelong learning” remains an important ideal and subject of many global policy debates? How do we refashion our practice — whether we are primarily practitioner-scholars or scholar-practitioners — so it fully takes into account these changes? In the spirit of promoting dialogue about the changing face of adult and lifelong education, I pose a few questions I have been struggling with in my own work. There are no “correct” answers to these questions...only situated responses bounded by the current context and how we frame what we each mean by “practice.” Because my current work is primarily in the domain of program planning, most of these questions concern the design and delivery of programs.

1. What experience do learners have with digital technologies and how do they use them in their daily lives?
2. How can current technologies be used most effectively to enhance access to learning and the quality of the learning experience?
3. How can a sense of community be enhanced (and feelings of alienation avoided) using technology?
4. Who will be privileged and who will be excluded if a particular technology is used?
5. How should we think about “professional boundaries” and power relations in a digital world? (Am I “old school” if I don’t have a Facebook page or accept invitations to become a “friend?”)
6. How do we evaluate the value of information and opinion in a digital universe of wikis, blogs and Tweets? What new skills are required by learners to fully engage in this world?
7. What do “privacy,” “confidentiality,” and “intellectual property” mean in the digital world? What are acceptable reasons — if any — for restricting access to online resources and learning communities?
8. How should our approaches to evaluation be changed — if at all — to account for new processes and outcomes in technology-enhanced learning?

Many strong currents are buffeting adult education, only a few of which I have mentioned. Although we may be tempted to fight some of these currents because we regard them as potentially harmful to the ideal of lifelong learning, we should choose carefully those we wish to resist and those we wish to embrace. There is great potential in some of these technologies but we should never lose sight of the costs and consequences of embracing them in our quest to promote lifelong learning for all.

Conclusion

In this paper we have offered examples from our work that illuminate how lifelong, life-wide and life-deep learning are central to movements for social justice and how popular education and critical engagement contribute to the development of a culturally diverse, democratic Canadian civil society. Further, we offered observations and questions intended to

invite dialogue about developing and sustaining communities of lifelong learning. There is much change afoot globally that is altering the landscape of adult education. Our hope is that this paper contributes to an exploration of this changing landscape and what it means for those committed to the ideal of lifelong learning.

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