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Reflecting on the Screen: Documentary Film Festivals and Citizenship Education

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Abstract: *Collaboration between adult educators and the media have played a significant role in adult education in Canada, leading to the creation of innovative programs in the past. Today, many stories of community struggles and victories do not make the news. Community-based documentary film festivals offer an alternative source of information and provide a community/ solidarity building event that contributes to rebuilding a meaningful public space.*

Background

Adult education takes place in a wide range of settings. In Canada the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) and the National Film Board (NFB) have played important roles in adult education programming (Selman, Selman, Cooke, & Dampier, 1998). The Canadian Association for Adult Education (CAAE) collaborated with CBC in two of the biggest experiments in media-delivered adult education, the National Farm Radio Forum (1941–1965) and the Citizen’s Radio Forum (1943–now) (Draper, 1998). Education was seen as key to the empowerment of citizens and their ability to seek solutions to the problems they faced (Mirth, 1996). The NFB was created in 1939 and by 1950 had established 250 community film councils who showed films in churches and union halls as catalysts to bringing people together (Chatwin, 1950). In 1950, NFB field officer James Lysyshyn initiated the first film festival in Canada, the Yorkton International Documentary Film Festival, in which two adult educators were involved [www.yorktonshortfilm.org/ default.aspx?page=10](http://www.yorktonshortfilm.org/default.aspx?page=10). In 1967, the NFB created Challenge for Change, a program that lasted until 1979 and which encouraged people to collectively analyze their situations, tell their stories, seek solutions, and engage in community development. Marchessault (1995) suggests that this participatory program fostered community dialogue and social change. A decade after Challenge for Change ended, a former NFB field officer with Challenge for Change was part of a citizens’ initiative to create the community-based World Community Film Festival to bring documentary by independent filmmakers to Courtenay, British Columbia. It has since expanded and with its Travelling World Community Film Festival makes their program available to eight communities in British Columbia, Manitoba, and Nova Scotia.

Purpose of This Study

Today, mass media are ubiquitous yet information about creative community development and successful social movements is not prominent in the realities displayed on the screens. In fact, the media critic Norman Solomon (2004) suggests that what the media provide is “a multiplicity of sameness” (p. 7). This study focuses on two of the many efforts to reclaim media for social justice education, namely two community-based documentary film festivals taking place in small Canadian towns with the goals of citizenship education, community building, and development of international solidarity. *In Pedagogy of Indignation*, Freire (2004)

suggests that denouncing the unjust society must be accompanied by announcing the possibility for a better world, which these festivals seem to do. This paper is also an attempt to respond to the International Council of Adult Education (ICAE)'s recent call for renewal of adult education for social and political transformation at the 6th International Conference on Adult Education held in December 2009 in Brazil (McQueen, personal communication, December 14, 2009).

Research Design and Methodology

This qualitative study used a case study methodology. The two documentary film festivals were selected according to the following criteria: documentaries by independent filmmakers from Canada and across the world; a wide range of topics related to social justice; taking place in small towns with less than 70,000 citizens and in different provinces; length of time they have been established; and familiarity of the researcher with these festivals. Topics included First Nations, war, peace, environmental issues, women, youth, aging, rehabilitation, innovative community development, current political issues, the resilience of the human spirit, and the use of arts in healing and/or social change. The World Community Film Festival started in 1990 in Courtenay, British Columbia, as an educational event to link local and global community development. Since 2003, through their Traveling World Community Film Festival, organizers have collaborated, loaned films, and offered support to groups across British Columbia and in Manitoba, Ontario, and Nova Scotia. The Traveling World Community Film Festival-Peterborough (Ontario) started in 2005, became independent in 2009, and was renamed ReFrame—Peterborough International Film Festival.

Between January 2008 and February 2010 the data collected included: observations; archival research; 60 exit interviews with attendees; four in-depth interviews with attendees; 10 in-depth interviews with organizers; four in-depth interviews with authorities in the field of arts and social change; three group interviews with 17 attendees; one group interview with 10 sponsors; two in-depth interviews with exhibitors and four short interviews with food vendors at the bazaars attached to these film festivals. In addition, data was also collected from 27 exit interviews and one group interview with five attendees at two smaller and more recent film festivals in Nova Scotia, the Antigonish International Film Festival, started in 2007, and the Sydney International Film Festival, started in 2009. These recent festivals featured some of the Traveling World Community Film Festival program or similar films. This paper focuses on responses by festival attendees in exit interviews and four group interviews of festival attendees. The questions asked of attendees were designed to identify reasons for attending: individual learning gained from attending the film festival, if any, as well as benefits for the community, if any. Preliminary analysis provided information about their expectations, thoughts, and reactions to specific films and to the film festival they attended in general.

Preliminary Findings

The preliminary findings show that documentary film festivals create public spaces where citizens come together to witness local and global stories, engage in dialogue, and often revise their views on a whole range of issues. People who attend these documentary film festivals report various levels of engagement as they describe being entertained, gaining new information, having perspectives transformed, and becoming increasingly active. The celebratory atmosphere of film festivals encourages people to unwind. The first level of engagement is

entertainment as one person speaks of going to the Peterborough film festival “to be entertained, stimulated, and inspired” (personal communication, January 26, 2008). Part of the pleasure is sitting in a darkened theatre with friends and strangers while learning about the challenges as well as the determination manifested in struggles for environmental protection or social, economic and political rights by youth, First Nations, labour, and women’s groups from around the world. Some of the more popular films involved the use of arts in transformation as well as stories of reconciliation and forgiveness.

While some people initially attend the films to be entertained, many describe the value of new information on a topic or a community as an important part of their experience. Knowledge of other communities’ efforts creates a bridge across differences and broadens perspectives. A woman at the Peterborough festival acknowledged the empowerment aspect of enlarging one’s world: “the documentary format...teaches me, it educates me, it broadens my perspective, it broadens the ground I stand on so I’m able to walk anywhere and walk with some more knowledge after I see that movie” (personal communication, January 26, 2008). As knowledge and understanding increase about a range of local and global issues, so does the possibility of perspective transformation. While the festival may take place in a familiar setting, it also allows attendees to suspend daily activities and enter a liminal space outside everyday concerns and activities, which makes it possible for views to be revised. For some, the films provide affirmation of what they are already doing: “I just adopted two children and right now my activism is just immersing myself totally in raising these children;” she continues, saying that the stories represented in films sometimes make it easier for her to accept that her activism “goes in and out of the public world, and in and out of the private world” (Courtenay attendee, personal communication, February 7, 2009).

By observing struggles and at times victories, some viewers report having changed their views about an issue. After the film *The world according to Monsanto*, which exposes their control over seeds, someone reported: “I heard people leaving the Monsanto film saying ‘gonna have to go organic’ and I get the feeling that when people left that film, that they were ready to take up placards and march” (Peterborough attendee, personal communication, January 31, 2009). Seeing documentary films has a cumulative effect: “as you know something more, it is either you know enough of the problem to be spurred to action or somebody gives you an idea for a solution that actually fits in your life at this time. So I think they’re part of a process of social change” (Courtenay attendee, personal communication, February 2, 2008).

Witnessing the creativity of individuals and communities can stimulate consideration of very specific projects and a desire to get involved. The film *Tocar y luchar (To play & to fight)* tells the story of the Venezuela Youth Orchestra, a classical music orchestra that counts 240,000 youth members from a wide range of backgrounds including disabilities, even deafness, and which uses music education for character development and community building. After that film attendees often said, ‘why don’t we do that here?’ People are inspired by what others are doing:

We [human beings] are irrepressible and we’re tremendously inventive and it’s good to have a film that reminds us of that. We’re in an age of a lack of hope and despair. And we need to see . . . what we can do, and be reminded of what we can do and be inspired. . . . Where do we find the resources for not despairing? And if we are despairing, how do we stay alive, how do we live? (Peterborough attendee, personal communication, January 26, 2008)

A commitment to working for social and political change is at times the result of having new perspectives. A woman in Peterborough said that the film festival had made her “become more activist,” much more vocal. One example she gives is sharing these kinds of films with friends and relatives when they have “popcorn video nights” (personal communication, January 31, 2009). Freire (2004) suggested, ‘denouncing’ an unjust world must be accompanied by ‘announcing’ the possibility of a better world and this man in Courtenay agrees:

A lot of times these things seem hopeless, the forces are so big [and] lined up, you know, big corporations, lots of money. The bulldozers knocking down that gorgeous little garden [in *Fierce Light*], it was heartbreaking. And yet, you have a choice, you run away and hide . . . I felt like just going off and looking after myself or my family. Then you realize, we have to stand here in the pain of all this confusion and not knowing if we are making a difference at all, and be real, and do the best that we can, and sometimes that works. It often transforms you in doing it and that’s how you transform the world and [Velcro Ripper, the director,] really made that point clearly. (Personal communication, February 7, 2009)

Aside from the sense of empowerment that comes from expanding knowledge, festival attendees often express appreciation for the opportunities for dialogue and exchange made possible by the film festival. By creating a space for exchange where diverse issues are exposed and victories and losses shared, documentary film festivals play a role in the rebuilding of the public sphere so important to democracy. Films/film festivals act as bridges across differences, helping to create links within a local community and to foster solidarity across the world:

Film festivals for me are very important because it brings a community together. So this film festival is a collection of films about activism and so on and social awareness . . . It brings us together around the possibilities of change, possibilities of what we can do as participants. And this particular festival is very important because it is bringing us collectively together as a community and seeing what role we can play in making some changes for our future. (Courtenay attendee, personal communication, February 7, 2009)

The film *Fierce Light* highlights efforts for change and the connection between activism and spirituality and was well received in Courtenay:

I am going to take on what I feel strongly about and that’s what this film did for me. It helped motivate me to take on issues that I have always sat on the sidelines and thought, ‘oh that’s interesting, I’m glad somebody is taking that on.’ Now I feel that I’m going to get involved and start to be a participant in some of those things, those changes that I would like to see. (Personal communication, February 7, 2009)

Although attending a film festival makes few demands on individuals, it can help build a sense of community, a sense of belonging, encouraging people to view future collective events positively. Many who were asked suggested that watching films at a film festival is different than watching films at home because of the presence of others. The desire of individuals to join with others and actively participate is crucial in a society suffering the effects of atomization. Ehrenreich (2006) suggests that “The very notion of the “collective,” of the common good, has

been eroded by the self-serving agendas of the powerful—their greed and hunger for still more power” and that throughout the capitalist and post communist world “decades of conservative social policy have undermined any sense of mutual responsibility and placed the burden of risk squarely on the individual or the family” (p. 254). A film festival provides an opportunity to become aware of new information in a collective setting and in a small way contributes toward encouraging respect and desire for collective events.

Conclusion and Implications for Adult Education

Bringing people together and creating a space where they engage with each other and with new ideas may be the greatest contribution film festivals can make in this age of individualism. Any contribution to the reweaving of community, locally as well as globally, is important. An event that welcomes a diversity of people seeking different levels of engagement, those seeking entertainment, those seeking information, those open to transforming their views, and those seeking paths of action, is important in a multicultural society as it can lead those who attend to a greater sense of efficacy, hope, and increased social and political awareness and, potentially, involvement both locally and globally. Schugurensky (2006, p. 77) suggests that

Pluralistic citizenship acknowledges that democratic politics must allow for particularities and differences but at the same time must encourage common actions for collective benefit. This “unity in diversity” approach nurtures cross-cultural dialogue and mutual respect . . . while it fosters joint struggles based on solidarity principles.

Film festivals provide public forums in multicultural contexts for citizens to reflect and exchange on a broad range of local and global issues as well as engage differences with respect, openness, and empathy in order to encourage greater democratic participation. In that light, community-based documentary film festivals are of interest to adult educators. Films, usually associated with leisure, encourage people to be more open and receptive. Documentary film festivals allow people to take in new information in a supportive atmosphere which creates a basis for dialogue. Boler and Allen (2002) suggest that documentaries by independent filmmakers provide the opportunity to think critically about the stories missing from mainstream media. By exposing problems alongside successful struggles, these film festivals create a public space for denouncing injustices and announcing possibilities, embodying Freire’s (2004) pedagogy of indignation and generating greater critical understanding of issues while stimulating the imagination. As Freire (2004) wrote: “It would be horrible if we could only feel oppression, but not imagine a different world or dream of it as a vision, and embrace the struggle for its erection” (p. 119).

An example of how a film festival can be relevant to citizens comes from the Sarajevo Film Festival, which was “so important to local morale that the Bosnian government has issued a stamp in its honor” (Turan, 2002, p. 94). People in Sarajevo saw films as a way out of isolation: “You see films because you want to connect, to communicate from your position on the other side of the moon, to check whether you still belong to the same reality as the rest of the world” (Haris Pasovic cited in Turan, 2002, p. 105). Today, adult education for social justice takes place in a wide range of settings including community organizations and social movements. As we face problems on a global scale, be it an economy spinning a trail of destruction, an ecological systems on the brink of collapse, human rights out of reach for many, or the growing gap

between rich and poor, adult educators are seeking ways to engage citizens in meaningful exchanges that promote social, economic, political, and ecological justice. Once again, we need to legitimize dreams of a just and sustainable world and documentary film festivals can play a role in our collective visioning.

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