

## **Experiential Learners or Learners with Experience? Contrasting Coady International Institute and St FX's Development Studies Program Approaches to Building Social Change Learning Contexts**

Jonathan Langdon  
Behrang Foroughi  
St. Francis Xavier University

**Abstract:** The facilitators of this roundtable work in two different contexts at St. Francis Xavier University. One works with the Coady International Institute, an adult education institution with a long history of community leadership and community development education in an international context, while the other works in a small but growing interdisciplinary program focused on social change and development. We both bring to this roundtable our adult education philosophy and practice, how what we do supports the *becoming* of community development/social change leaders we envision, and how learners view their own development as a result of participating in an adult education learning environment (whether embedded in leadership learning or experiential learning approaches).

### **Introduction**

The facilitators of this roundtable work in two different contexts at St. Francis Xavier University. One works with the Coady International Institute, an adult education institution with a long history of community leadership and community development education in an international context, while the other works in a small but growing interdisciplinary program focused on social change and development. To contrast these two programs simplistically, one brings learners together in a room to build mutual leadership (of the Preskill and Brrokfield, 2009, variety) for social change, while the other uses layered experiential learning (inflected with Mezirow's transformational learning) engagements to teach young and relatively inexperienced learners about the complexity of social change processes.

We both bring to this roundtable our adult education philosophy and practice, how what we do supports the *becoming* of community development/social change leaders we envision, and how learners view their own development as a result of participating in an adult education learning environment (whether embedded in leadership learning or experiential learning approaches). Concretely put, the contrasting programs include a) a five-month Diploma in *Development Leadership* for community development leaders from the global south, and b) a three year undergraduate program in *Development Studies* that includes optional and required local service learning experiences, and a required local or international internship in a social change collective (movement, organization, institution, etc.).

### **Discussion**

What interests us in this comparison of programs at Coady/St. FX is how we constitute learners, and how we envision the becoming, a deepened sense of self, vis-à-vis the social context in which one is engaged, that further enhances one's confidence while nurturing hope and imagination for a possibility of change. We will share emergent results from research on a) Coady's program in which experienced participants from the global south share and reflect on their development practice, and analyze the frames through which they have been engaged with

social change efforts. This includes developing and applying a variety of analytical lenses (e.g., gender, power, sustainability, wellbeing, etc.) to examine and make sense of their past and current work with communities around the world; b) development studies students engaging in multiple, and cumulative experiential learning engagements to explore the link between this vision of becoming change agents and their own understanding of their learning; this research is drawn from 6 focus groups: 2 at the introductory level, where experiential learning engagements are optional; 3 at the Third-year level, where students undertake a required local experiential learning engagement and parallel transformative learning course; and 2 at the Fourth-year level, where honours students in Development Studies are required to undertake an intensive 3 to 4 month placement in a social change context/organization often critical of global and local power relations (c.f. Langdon & Agyeyomah, 2013). These focus group sessions used a form of the most significant change process (Davis & Dart, 2005) to not only generate a participatory sense of the experience of layering different experiential learning engagements, but to also provide participants with an opportunity to underscore what is most significant of this layering, as well as most significant of experiential learning itself. From an experiential and transformative learning perspective, as well as a more general adult education perspective, the results of these focus groups are interesting, not only for the way they became part of the process of *becoming* (i.e. pedagogic in their own rite), but also for the way they revealing a growing appreciation for the complexity the experience reveals, rather than the clarity. The impact and importance of experiential learning is more clearly understood and articulated at the Second and Third year, whereas the Senior Development Studies students show a growing capacity to contend with ambiguity and distinctions in their understanding of issues of social change – a process that leads them to deeply embedded reflective practice into their approaches to any social change context.

After elaborating upon this research and the interesting way in which layering experiential learning leads to less self-assured, but more self-reflexive students, we will discuss, in a conversation-based way, the way in which this research both echoes and contrasts descriptions of learning from Coady participants, and the vision behind this learning.

In presenting these two comparable, yet contrasting approaches to building social change leadership, we aim to highlight the links between pedagogic intention and learning, as well as destabilize this link by illustrating learner agency. This should provide rich food for discussion, as we will ask participants to reflect on the inherent tension in educational processes between intentionality and learner-centeredness.

### References

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