

Reviving a community's proud past to contemplate its future: What can the Antigonish Movement do for us today?

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Learning in nonformal and social action environments has been an overlooked realm of adult education (Taylor, 2006; Foley, 1999) that is now finally inspiring a growing body of theory and practice, though some gaps persist. This paper focuses on the librarian as an adult educator in the town of Antigonish, Nova Scotia. The author focuses in on three cases in which librarians led community based initiatives for change.

The cases centred on the Antigonish Movement, a social and economic mobilization program in the 1930s-40s that revitalized Northeastern Nova Scotia, and influenced adult education further afield. The cases, enacted in 2009, were: Case 1—an archival digital collection created by academic libraries and archives; Case 2—a regional reading program led by the public libraries; and Case 3—a six-part nonformal education program themed on the contemporary relevance of the principles of the Antigonish Movement, co-created by librarians and adult educators.

The cases drew on this shared history in Antigonish to explore current social issues. The libraries' role in these activities is examined. Data for this case study are drawn from the author-researcher's own participation as well as from content created through the program including transcripts of the educational activities, program websites and participants' evaluations. Current literature on libraries and social change as well as nonformal adult learning and community education informs the analysis.

Theoretical framework

To analyse the cases, I draw from the contribution of Taylor (2006) on nonformal learning and Hunt's (2009, 2005) work on community education. First, I set the context with libraries and adult learning. Libraries had a strong adult education mandate in the Antigonish Movement (Adams, 2009). Today, in this Internet age, librarians are reviving their social role (Aabø, 2005)—a role more reflective of their mission of social justice and adult education a hundred years ago before it was eroded by professionalization (Imel & Duckett, 2009). The Internet can help librarians facilitate adult learning by sharing information outside the walls of the traditional library (Imel & Duckett, 2009), and raise awareness about local history that can integrate the knowledge of new residents to reflect the community's growing ethnic diversity (Reid & Macafee, 2007). Adams, Krolak, Kupidura, & Pahernik, (2002) promote libraries' role for, 'popular education, community involvement and valuing local knowledge' (p. 27). Yet, Imel and Duckett (2009) lament that librarians and adult educators, 'seem to operate on parallel

tracks with little or no crossover between the fields' (p. 183). A decade ago, Foley (1999) noted the dearth of research on nonformal learning. Taylor (2006) identifies studies emerging from the global south, but adequate research in North America is still lacking. Vibrant research in community development and social movement learning is growing in Canada (see English, 2009), however libraries continue to be all but absent from the discussion.

Taylor (2006) describes three aspects of nonformal education: domain of knowledge, community of people, and shared practice. The emphasis is on how the learning is social, situated and collaborative. Taylor identifies the need to study how educators in local nonformal settings make sense of their practice, citing learning places such as parks, historical sites and museums. I would add that this reflection is also required by librarians. Hunt's (2005) analysis of community education illuminates the dynamics of working with groups sharing a physical locality, common interests, or solidarity around social justice goals, highlighting the importance of collective learning and action. Foley's (1999) work on this learning as a form of social movement learning is useful in understanding the social justice motivations for collective learning, and how we can learn from other movements. Working in the home of a significant social movement, how can it contribute to our social movement learning in a contemporary context? Personal identification with history (Armstrong & Coles, 2008) is of particular interest to me in this case, as well as how adult education history can help us to assess our task in exploring current socio-economic challenges (Brown, 2009).

I draw on Taylor's (2006) and Hunt's (2009, 2005) common threads to examine the relevance of identity, locality, and history to analyse these cases of library-led activities. Identity emerges through the collective values attributed to the Antigonish Movement, the shared pride of movement, and shared origins of the organizations involved. Does this shared identity facilitate an environment for collaborative learning? Shared identity is closely linked with locality. This is not a social movement studied from afar but one that blossomed in this region. Locality is also refers to the learning space, be it a classroom, a library or an 'unspace' (Hunt, 2009) like a website. Elsewhere, I explore the relevance of identity and locality in the learning program (Irving, 2010). Relating to the theme of this year's conference, I turn to the significance of history in these cases, as it is this famous, yet very local history that underpins identification with the movement.

Describing the cases

This project began as an initiative to create a digital collection of archival material from the Antigonish Movement (Case 1). The reading program (Case 2) that the libraries led, and an education program (Case 3) that the libraries co-sponsored provided an opportunity to highlight the role of libraries in the movement and to revive their adult learning and community development mission today.

Case 1: Coady-Extension Digital Collection

The digital collection comprised of documents and images gathered from the archives and libraries of St. Francis Xavier University (St.FX), Coady International Institute, and

the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Martha to share primary source material ranging from the time of the Antigonish Movement up to the current work of these institutions. Those of us selecting content attempted to appeal to a broad range of users who may be conducting academic research, school projects, genealogy, or local histories. A website (coadyextension.stfx.ca) provided a gateway to the collection. Guides were written for self-directed instruction on searching the collection. My own recent interest in how websites are created to provide relevant information (Irving & English, in press) led me to wonder how people would use this collection. This fed my interest in working on activities that used the digital collection. At the same time, as I gathered source material and spoke informally with others about the project, I was struck by the number people who were eager to tell me stories that had been handed down to them from relatives. A strong oral memory still exists in this place.

Case 2: Antigonish Reads

The past decade has seen the spread of mass reading programs. Often library-led, these programs ask residents of an area to read a chosen book of significance to the region. A librarian at St. FX suggested *Antigonish Reads* to promote Coady's (1939) *Masters of Their Own Destiny* in the new digital collection. The book is Dr. Coady's first hand account of community mobilization through the Antigonish Movement. *Antigonish Reads* was led with enthusiasm by the local public libraries, adding two parallel programs: *Canso Reads* (Canso is cited as the crucible of the Antigonish Movement where Fr. Jimmy Tompkins initiated many of his ideas); and *Margaree Reads* (Margaree was the birthplace of both Coady and Tompkins). Readers were invited to public gatherings to discuss the book. The National Film Board's film *The Rising Tide* from the 1950s was shown to bring people visually to that time, as the film contains archival footage showing the work of study clubs and cooperatives in the region. The public library created a website (www.antigonishreads.ca) where an electronic copy of the book and photos of public events were posted, and reader comments were sought.

Case 3: People's School on the Antigonish Movement

Throughout the autumn of 2009, a *People's School on the Antigonish Movement* was held. Each event was coordinated by one group with ties to the history and philosophy of the Antigonish Movement and themed on one of its six principles (Johnson, 1944): *The Primacy of the Individual*; *Social Reform Must Come Through Education*; *Education Must Begin With the Economic*; *Education Must Be Through Group Action*; *Effective Social Reform Involves Fundamental Changes in Social and Economic Institutions*; and *A Full and Abundant Life for All*. The lead group was free to interpret the relevance of the principle creating the content, location, format and speakers. As Taylor (2006) notes the voluntary nature of nonformal learning, there was no registration or fees so people were welcome but not obliged to attend all the sessions. The pedagogical methods utilized in each session varied considerably: guest speakers; a theatre piece; photo essays of community life; historical films; a conversation café; and a case study of a small village celebrated for its achievements in community mobilization through a strong volunteer network.

The collaborating groups on the People's School all had direct ties with the Antigonish Movement. The Sisters of St. Martha, a congregation of religious women, acknowledge Dr. Coady's role to help them expand their work in rural areas (Cameron, 2000) and become active in the movement. The Coady International Institute was created in 1959 in response to the international demand for programs modelling the movement's focus on adult education and economic cooperation. The Bergengren Credit Union and Braemore Co-operative of Antigonish are surviving institutions from the movement. St. Francis Xavier University's Extension Department was the home of the movement, and the academic Department of Adult Education was created to respond to the need for research and study of this field so central to the movement's work. Libraries, such as Fr. Tompkins' *People's Library* provided much of the information sought by the burgeoning study clubs. Libraries in the region today acknowledge advocacy work of Tompkins to establish a library system.

Analysis of the cases

Many people in Antigonish were in a mood to reflect on this famous history as 2009 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Rev. Dr. Moses Coady and the eightieth anniversary of the publication of his iconic treatise, *Masters of Their Own Destiny* (1939). The Bergengren Credit Union and Coady International Institute also celebrated jubilees that year. The digital collection (Case 1) was created at this time to recognize these milestones and to contribute to the ongoing interest in this history. *Masters of Their Own Destiny* has been out of print for decades, so those of us working on the digital collection were happy to provide online the full contents of the book. *Antigonish Reads* (Case 2) reintroduced the book to the local populace.

Labelling the education program (Case 3) a 'People's School' intentionally evoked the history as a people's school in 1921 was the first adult education project of St. Francis Xavier University. The People's School was revived in the 1990s by the Extension Department for educational programs on the economy and on health. Using such terminology certainly taps into a vivid 'brand recognition' in this area. Organizing the People's School around the six principles of the Antigonish Movement provided a framework for the program, to introduce brief historical contexts and a springboard for contemporary issues.

In the academic realm, there continues to be a trickle of critical analysis and reflection integrating new theoretical interpretations and archival research. But this work does not always resonate locally. Indeed, it can be difficult to be overly critical of a movement that had such an impact on a region experiencing acute levels of poverty. Older residents remember that their grandparents were able to keep the family farm or that aunts and uncles stayed in the region instead of moving to the 'Boston States' along with the rest of the Maritime diaspora. This is not to say that historical academic research was ignored. The second People's School, hosted by the library, did provide an opportunity to share the research of one local academic librarian (Adams, 2009) who created a theatre piece to re-enact the lively correspondence between Fr. Jimmy Tompkins and Nora Bateson, two ardent adult educators who collaborated to promote public libraries. This demonstrated an entertaining yet very effective way to present to

the public this academic research that sheds light on the creation of our libraries in this region.

While each principle included some historical information, discussions quickly switched to current issues of local economic sustainability, social inclusion and ongoing youth outmigration. Providing historical cues in the Antigonish Reads discussion group seemed to promote the most active connection between past and present, as people who read stories of their communities' past, expressed a sense of despair that we lack the collective spirit of past generations, and are, perhaps, squandering this legacy.

Many trace the activities of their own relatives in the historical record of the Antigonish Movement. Armstrong and Coles, (2008) in considering 'historical literacy,' note the personal motivation in informal learning about history: 'From the perspective of "history from below", we are part of history. The growth of interest in genealogy and family history is indicative of a fascination with seeking the historical basis of our identity' (p. 67). They cite the popularity of history documentaries and celebrity genealogies such as *Who do you think you are?* in which famous people search their family history with the assistance of 'professional experts.' Unfortunately, who these experts are is not described. The Canadian version of this show was sponsored by Library and Archives Canada and care was made to point out the visits to a village or church archivist to look up family history, highlighting the key role of archives and libraries in this sleuthing.

Zipsane (2009) proposes a revitalized heritage learning that includes 'archival pedagogy,' creating a learning opportunity for people to experience the joy of discovery in finding information in these primary sources. In the digital collection (case 1) *Masters of Their Own Destiny* (Coady, 1939) is presented both as the published edition and the manuscript with marginalia and editing notes made as the manuscript made its way through the hands of Extension Department staff. Correspondence between Dr. Coady and his secretary during his travels reveals a self-deprecating wit that gives a personal touch to a lauded historical figure.

Reid and Macafee (2007) recognize the importance of using the Internet to link people to local collections of rich primary source material, both old and new. The second people's school provided a reminder of the significance of preserving contemporary local knowledge. Many decades after Fr. Tompkins shook the shores of Canso, the town faced hardship again with the closure of the inshore cod fishery. An unemployed resident spent one winter travelling to gather neighbours' stories. The resulting book was not only popular among residents, the federal department of fisheries requested a copy for its library as it contained knowledge that they said was not obtainable anywhere else.

Analyses of history and knowledge preservation can overlook lighthearted elements of local knowledge, yet fun is also important for nonformal learning (Taylor, 2006). One elderly participant had earlier related a childhood memory that she always knew a study club was meeting at her home when her mother baked molasses cookies. Public library staff then dutifully provided molasses cookies on the evening they hosted. For the final

People's School, I ensured that two other Maritime staples were on hand—oatcakes and ginger snaps (campus food services were, mysteriously, unable to provide molasses cookies). This apparent diversion to biscuits is a reminder that as we engage with the history of the Antigonish Movement we remain mindful of the personal connection, as such detail is noticed.

Implications for further research and practice

While this project originated around the creation and promotion of a digital collection, energy grew through the adult learning activities that brought people together. There are lessons to be learned by libraries developing online resources intended for community use. The combination of activities and organizations created community interest and participation that may not have happened with the provision of a digital collection alone. The online visibility of the digital collection and *Antigonish Reads* program fostered 'archival pedagogy' (Zipsane, 2009), acting as a gateway to the library (Reid & Macafee, 2007). The *Antigonish Reads* site would have benefited from a more active invitation to correspond with library staff beyond simply commenting on the book. Yet, the correspondence generated was encouraging and is an indicator for future online initiatives to ensure there is a greater effort to foster various types of engagement both online and in person to support learning.

Nonformal education programs that make use of resources are also helpful to increase familiarity with collections and to facilitate their use. Examples from popular culture such as *Who do you think you are?* could be played with to suit local contexts such as *Where do you think you are?* to develop creative uses for collections and to foster collaborations in preserving local knowledge in a more active way. Tapping into local history is a useful model to engage people to re-examine current social issues. Programs and services can do more to provide resources in ways that demonstrably relate to community interests that can have farther reaching educational effects.

During the public gatherings, concerns were expressed that 'somebody' should be recording the stories of our elders. There is an important role for libraries to create a space to encourage storytelling and preservation of local knowledge. Local history, especially in rural communities like Antigonish, may be viewed by newcomers as the preserve of the 'founding families' but Reid and Macafee's (2007) work on using immigrants' stories to help them find a place in their new communities is worth further exploration. Recording oral histories is not only useful for capturing stories of many years ago. The public library is well placed to be that 'somebody' to find ways to participate in preserving this vital local knowledge both old and new.

While these cases are described in the context of a particular famed past, all communities, however defined, have rich and emergent knowledge generated by their own evolving identities, histories and sense of place. Libraries reside in an excellent position to know their communities and to create relevant programs. They can provide the space, support and resources for community-led initiatives and local knowledge preservation. The creative research conducted in the field of informal and nonformal

learning has much to inform libraries' revitalized adult education roles. The issue is to ensure that people in the community see the library in that role.

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