

Adult Educators in the Library: Analysis of a Community Learning Initiative

Catherine J. Irving
Coady International Institute

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Abstract: This paper analyses three linked cases of nonformal learning in the community initiated by libraries. The cases look at the history and contemporary relevance of the Antigonish Movement to Northeastern Nova Scotia. An analytic framework, derived from the literature on libraries and social change as well as nonformal learning and community education, is applied to the cases to determine the interplay of identity and locality, as well as the library's role in such learning activities.

Learning in nonformal and social action environments has been a vital but under researched realm of adult education (Taylor, 2006; Foley, 1999) that is now finally inspiring a growing body of theory and practice. Yet, in the full spectrum of adult learning and teaching, some areas are persistently overlooked. 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, employing archival and current information, 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 and economic issues. The libraries' role these community education 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 inform an analytical framework.

Theoretical Framework

To analyse the cases, I draw from the contributions of Taylor (2006) on nonformal learning and Hunt's (2009) work on community education. Foley's (1999) work on social movement learning is also instructive. First, I set the context with current research on libraries and social change. Libraries with a strong adult education mandate were active in the Antigonish Movement (Adams, 2009; Neal, 1998). Today, in this Internet age, librarians are re-examining their social role (Aabø, 2005)—a role reflecting 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 in to reflect the community's growing ethnic diversity (Reid & Macafee, 2007). Public libraries are eager to be active partners in community development that is truly inclusive (Williment, 2009), and provides a shift in popular perception amidst prevailing assumptions of libraries as quiet zones of strict protocols. Barriers persist within the profession itself as exclusionary practices need to be changed (Williment, 2009). Yet, libraries and resource centres can provide a role for "popular education, community involvement and valuing local knowledge" (Adams, Krolak, Kupidura, & Pahernik, 2002, 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) complained of the dearth of research on nonformal learning. Taylor (2006) notes that studies have emerged from the global south, but this continues to be an under researched area in North America. In Canada, vibrant activity and research in community development and social movement learning is growing (see English, 2009). Yet, libraries continue to be all but absent from the discussion. This case study contributes to filling the gap Taylor identifies. The link between librarians and community education has not been well developed and will enrich the conversation when it does.

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 of librarians. Hunt's (2009) analysis of community education illuminates the dynamics of working with groups sharing a physical locality, common interests, or solidarity around social justice goals. Studies such as hers highlight 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. The underlying question of studying a local, historical social movement is: How does it contribute to social movement learning in a contemporary context and integrate with community development practice?

These bodies of theory inform the questions for analysis of library-led nonformal learning activities. Drawing on Taylor's (2006) and Hunt's (2009) common threads, I will focus on two recurring elements in the cases: identity and locality. Identity emerges through the collective defining of the values that this area defines as integral, the cooperation, 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 defined in terms of the physical spaces in which this learning takes place, be it a classroom, a library or an "unspace" (Hunt, 2009) like a website.

Describing the Cases

This project began as an initiative to create a digital collection of archival material related to the Antigonish Movement (Case 1). The reading program (Case 2) which the libraries led, and the education program (Case 3) which the libraries co-sponsored provided an opportunity to

highlight the overlooked role of libraries in the Antigonish Movement and to revive their mission in adult learning and community development today.

Case 1: Coady-Extension Digital Collection

The digital collection comprised of historical material gathered from the archives and libraries of St. Francis Xavier University (St.FX), Coady International Institute, and the archives of the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Martha. Those of us selecting content attempted to appeal to a broad range of users who may visit the site to conduct academic research, school projects, genealogy, or local histories. A companion website (coadyextension.stfx.ca) provided a gateway to the collection. Guides were written to provide self-directed instruction on searching the collection. Given my interest in how websites are used to provide information that is relevant for users (Irving & English, in press), I wondered how this collection would be used. 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 of people who were eager to tell me stories that had been handed down to them from grandmothers or uncles. A strong oral memory still exists in this place.

Case 2: Antigonish Reads

The past decade has seen the spread of popular reading programs. Often library-led, these programs ask residents of an area to read a single book that resonates with that place. 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 recounts the conditions and the mobilization of communities in the 1930s. *Antigonish Reads* was led with enthusiasm by the local public libraries, adding two parallel programs: *Canso Reads* (Canso is often cited as the crucible of the Antigonish Movement where Fr. Jimmy Tompkins initiated many of his ideas); and *Margaree Reads* (Margaree is the home 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. The "People's School" draws its name from St. FX's early adult education programs in the 1920s. Each event was coordinated by one group with ties to the history and philosophy of the Antigonish Movement and themed on one of the six principles of the Antigonish Movement (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. People were welcome but not obliged to attend all the sessions. The pedagogical methods utilized in each session varied considerably: guest speakers on local projects, a theatre piece re-enacting early efforts to establish libraries in the region; photo essays of community life; historical films; conversation cafés on chosen issues;

and a case study of a small village celebrated for its achievements in community mobilization through a strong volunteer network.

Analysis of Cases

Here I apply the framework informed by Taylor (2006) and Hunt (2009), to consider the elements of identity and locality as they relate to library-led nonformal learning in these cases.

Identity

There is clearly still a strong sense of pride and identification with the Antigonish Movement in this region, primarily among older people who remember first hand accounts of local organizing. The public library held an *Antigonish Reads* (Case 2) group discussion. For an event held in the “dog days” of August, it was well attended with lively discussion on current conditions. The stories of past self reliance and community mobilization apparently struck a nerve as people contemplated their levels of cooperative activity in a climate of global economics and “big box stores.” Participants expressed frustration that they are losing control of their community’s economic wellbeing. Stories of relatives active in the movement contributed, perhaps, to the sense of melancholy in the room that we were letting our collective ancestors down.

This identity of pride and responsibility became a hook for the subsequent *People’s School* (Case 3). While an interest in the Antigonish Movement may have drawn initial attendance, people stated what kept them coming was the range of content, interesting themes, methods and activities. One elderly participant said she couldn’t wait to the next evening because she didn’t know what to expect. Another participant, expecting history lectures, was initially reluctant to join in “group work.” She quickly appreciated the activities, and by the second session was asking how she could become more actively involved in programs in the library.

Nonformal learning elements that drew out the shared identity and collaboration enabled participants to reflect critically on their practices and question assumptions of their current social activism. The first *People’s School* explored inclusion as several speakers recounted experiences of those who continue to be marginalized in our region by income, ethnicity, or mental and physical barriers. Participants expressed how they learned from each other in unexpected ways, causing them to reflect on who they saw or ignored in their community.

The groups collaborating on the *People’s School* all identified with the Antigonish Movement, either as players or products. The Sisters of St. Martha, a local congregation of religious women, acknowledge Dr. Coady’s role to help them achieve independence from the University’s control. This enabled them to work in rural areas (Cameron, 2000) positioning them to become vital contributors to the movement. The Coady International Institute was created in 1959 in response to the international demand for programs to enable development workers from around the world to apply these practices of adult education and community-based 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 academic study of this field so central to the movement’s work. The libraries brought to light a partner often overlooked in the movement’s history. Fr. Jimmy Tompkins was a driving force in the promotion of libraries, sowing the seeds for the province’s library system (Adams, 2009).

Locality

As Hunt (2009) notes challenges in the defining and uncritical use of “community,” she stresses that community educators need to be purposeful in “addressing what it means to be a member of a local community” (p. 73). Locality here means geography of this region, the physical spaces used for events, and the “unplace” (Hunt, 2009) of the digital collection.

Locality means more than a shared space, as the name Antigonish conveys a sense of history and perhaps responsibility to that past that would differ from other locations. This element came out most vividly in the *Antigonish Reads* (Case 2) group discussion on *Masters of Their Own Destiny*. The book details the progress of the community-based activities in many of the farming and coastal communities by people whose family names are recognized still today. The discussions focused on concerns of the perceived autonomy that has been lost as frustration was expressed that the local grocery stores only sold frozen fish packaged in China. How could a coastal community not have locally sourced fish? The fact that Antigonish’s own consumer co-operative is struggling to survive was an irony not lost on the group.

The locations chosen for the People’s School (Case 3) were also relevant. The first session was held at the motherhouse of the congregation of the Sisters of St. Martha. This place may have the highest concentration of people in Antigonish with vast oral histories to share of the movement. Many Marthas grew up in this region and witnessed the movement’s impact on their families’ lives, instilling in them a commitment to social justice: “There is a spark which is ignited in those of us who had parents who knew and were inspired by Coady and Tompkins” (Sr. Theresa Parker, personal correspondence, July 12, 2009).

The libraries hosted several sessions, promoting their active community education role. I noticed the discomfort of some of the educators in using the Marie Michael Library as a location. Sr. Marie Michael, a dynamic fieldworker in the Antigonish Movement and the Coady Institute’s first librarian, was ahead of her time in encouraging the use of the library as an active adult learning space. In the 1990s, many academic libraries created “learning commons” (Keating & Gabb, 2005), innovations that Marie Michael had applied without fanfare many decades before. Much current research on learning commons exists within academic institutional contexts, and grapples uneasily with apparently mutually exclusive environments for social interaction and individual study (Bryant, Matthews, & Walton, 2009). More work is needed in creating spaces that facilitate interaction for lifelong learning and community education.

Reflecting on the “unspace” of the Internet, the *Antigonish Reads* website statistics tracked use of content, but online sharing tools were rarely used. Yet, the website did provide exposure to library services as some people contacted the libraries after finding the website from search engines, introducing them to library staff and archivists who could provide research assistance beyond what was available online.

Two of the sessions were held in future home for the region’s public library—a multipurpose facility integrating adult learning programs, health promotion, local heritage and arts displays, a community kitchen, computer facilities, oh yes, and books (www.peoplesplace.ca). By the end of 2010, hopefully the idea of a community library as a “people’s place” will be fully realized.

Implications for Theory and Practice

As cases inspired by a movement for social change, did they effect social change and what role did librarians play in effecting this change through promoting nonformal learning? To what extent is such an education program defined by the organizers or responsive to community learning goals? The purpose of this project in fairness was not to revisit the well worn history of the Antigonish Movement but to make use of that enduring enthusiasm and pride to see how it can be used to revive interest in collective community action today. It is too early to say if there is a renewed interest in the Antigonish Movement beyond vows to “shop co-op.”

While this project originated around the creation and promotion of a digital collection, the energy grew around the adult learning activities that brought people together. There are lessons to be learned by libraries when creating online resources for community use. 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 an encouraging result and teaches us to foster various types of engagement both online and in person.

Tapping into local identity and history can engage people to re-examine current social issues. Libraries have a role 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 exploring.

While the cases here are tied to a famed past, all communities, however defined, have rich and emergent knowledge generated by their own evolving identities and sense of place. Libraries 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 contribute to 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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