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Applying an Intersectional Approach to Facilitating and Global Development Practice

Pamela Johnson
Wendy Kraglund-Gauthier, PhD
with Bridget Houston

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The Coady International Institute Phone: (902) 867-3960
St. Francis Xavier University Phone: 1-866-820-7835 (within Canada)
PO Box 5000 Fax: (902) 867-3907
Antigonish, NS Web: www.coady.stfx.ca
Canada B2G 2W5 Email: coady@stfx.ca

Applying an Intersectional Approach to Facilitating and Global Development Practice

Many colleges and universities are seeing a growing number of students who identify within several minority groups. This increased diversity can likely be partially attributed to progressive policy focused on equity and inclusion in elementary and secondary schools and in post-secondary institutions at provincial, national, and international levels. Yet, few institutions are gathering information about these demographics to better understand the learning needs and interests of a diverse set of learners (MacDonald & Ward, 2017). Likewise, one of the challenges and opportunities confronting organizations such as the Coady International Institute (the Coady) is related to the design of relevant content for these students and the readiness of teaching staff to create more inclusive and welcoming environments.

UNESCO's 2009 description of education for sustainable development (ESD) refers to values and respect for, among others, difference and diversity and a goal to achieve a just, equitable world. Despite this public pronouncement, from their research, Wolbring, Burke, Mackay, Rybchiniski, and Noga (2013) have noted that people with disabilities continue to be either invisible or under-represented in the formal and informal discourse on ESD. In a Canadian context, Reaume's (2012) research on disability history inside and outside of the academy reveals a similar picture of marginalization and a lack of acknowledgement of the contributions of people with disabilities across the country. "Marginalization is thus a process, not a label—a process of social de-valuation that serves to justify disproportional access to scarce societal resources" (Rummens & Dei, 2010, para. 4).

The Coady is an organization that was established in the late 1950s and has aimed to support the learning of leaders working in the areas of community driven development and social justice in Canada and the global South. The mandate of the Coady was born out of a local community economic development movement in response to significant poverty impacting rural farmers, working class citizens, and marginalized groups across Nova Scotia. To date, the organization has welcomed over 6000 practitioners through its doors, both on- and in off-campus classrooms in Canada and around the world.

In 2016, the Coady developed an Innovations Fund to support projects created by staff and partners to build compelling and relevant new tools, methods of teaching, and approaches to community development. The "changes [the Coady] wants to see are those that make it easier for citizens in every society, including the most marginalized populations, to act with others to initiate and sustain efforts to improve the wellbeing of their members and communities" (Draft Innovations Strategy, internal document). It was with this goal in mind that this project was formed.

The Innovation

To begin to address the gap between global normative aspirations such as the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* and the lived experiences of people with disabilities on the other (Steinstra & Estey, 2016), Johnson, a teaching staff at the Coady, initiated and engaged in an innovation project with the aim of better reflecting the realities faced by people living with disabilities in course curriculum. This included examining how community-driven approaches to development currently were addressing aspects of inclusion, access, and equity and exploring ways they can be strengthened to meet both the needs of practitioners *living with*

disabilities and practitioners *working with* people living with disabilities (PWDs). This content is not only vital in providing key resources and learning for facilitators and practitioners with respect to the realities faced by PWDs, an aspect of teaching that is often ignored or under-emphasized in their education and training, but it also begins to reinforce the values embedded in the decolonization of pedagogy and the classroom.

The innovation project was collaborative in design and implementation; individuals with lived experience¹ and expertise in disability and global development were invited to collaborate with Johnson, as she did not have this lived experience. Outputs developed jointly by Johnson and project participants included a collection of tools and materials as well as teaching and facilitation strategies to aid in creating inclusive educational processes and content. The content focused on accessibility, disabled persons' movements, progressive policy, disability, global development, as well as other content identified by the teaching staff of the Coady. A major outcome of Johnson's innovation project was to create new knowledge products with persons with lived experience that would be both shared internally and externally as open-source material. The intent was to share the content with graduates via webinars disseminated via the Coady's graduate learning network and other media-rich repositories.

Pedagogy and Program Review

Given the current international focus on the post-2015 Development Agenda and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons Living with Disabilities, this project was designed and implemented to contribute to global efforts in addressing the broad systemic inequalities impacting PWDs and studying in learning organizations rooted in social justice. The intent was to facilitate sustained use of decolonizing teaching strategies and methods throughout the Coady's education teaching and learning. The project goals focused on building and bringing about positive concrete change through improved and/or increased applied knowledge, skills, and attitudes for understanding, instructing, and interacting with diverse experiences PWDs.

A program review took place by way of a scan of the learning materials available to Johnson, a Coady teaching staff member at the time of the research. She also conducted interviews with Coady staff members, primarily teaching staff, between December 2016 and February 2017.

During the program review meetings, 18 Coady teaching staff and support staff were asked two questions:

1. In what way do you bring in the experiences of people living with disabilities into your course content?
2. What is the focus of your course(s) and what kind of material do you need to help represent the realities faced by persons living with disabilities?

Results from this initial program review revealed that while social justice education is the focus of work at the Coady and that at various levels its members speak to the experiences of marginalized people in the context of their subject areas, very little content coverage includes PWDs.

Coady staff expressed interest in creating more accessible and inclusive classrooms for

¹ "Lived experience, as it is explored and understood in qualitative research, is a representation and understanding of a researcher or research subject's human experiences, choices, and options and how those factors influence one's perception of knowledge." See <http://methods.sagepub.com/reference/sage-encyc-qualitative-research-methods/n250.xml>

development practitioners and community developers. Several teaching staff shared, however, that they did not feel comfortable teaching content related to the experiences of PWDs as they did not have lived experience, nor did they fully understand those experiences or realities. Most of the staff interviewed also spoke to the need for orientation and support in creating a more accessible and inclusive spaces in the classroom.

Participants were thoughtful about how and why they used certain learning tools in the classroom and rejected others. There was also a humble acknowledgement that due to a lack of exposure in their own learning and experiences, the in-class intersectional analysis did not always include PWDs. They acknowledged that based on course evaluations and conversations with teaching staff, Coady students appreciated efforts to build inclusive classrooms. Other aspects of higher learning were questioned and included evaluation, questions around accommodation and disclosure, and considerations for affirmative action in recruitment of new participants.

Themes emerged in the program review and interviews, and the responses and themes were used to inform the content that was developed for the Coady's online learning management platform. Following the interviews, as part of Johnson's innovation project, a contract position for an educator with a strong knowledge of disability and global development and development of content and pedagogy was awarded to Steven Estey. Estey is an internationally-respected advocate and educator, and in 2006, was a member of Canada's official government delegation to the UN, involved in drafting the new *Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities* (CRPD), the first human rights treaty of the 21st century. Since 2007, Estey (2014) has led Disabled Persons International's work to encourage swift ratification of the CRPD and its rigorous implementation world-wide.

Internal Workshop Content

Based on feedback from interviews, Estey and Johnson developed content to address multiple areas of interests covered by core teaching staff of the organization, associate educators, and internal needs related to increased accessibility in the classroom. A review of the created content was built into the design of the project; this review was done by an alumnus of the Coady who have lived experience and expertise in the area of disability and global development and training. Additionally, a former staff member of the Coady, also with lived experience and extensive knowledge of disability and global development, was engaged in the review of the content. Both reviewers provided meaningful feedback and suggested additional resources, which were integrated into the final content offerings.

In the first half of the workshop session, Estey and Johnson reviewed with Coady staff the laws and norms impacting persons living with disabilities globally and provided an overview of relevant accessibility legislation in the province of Nova Scotia. During the second portion of the half-day training, staff participants were shown how their requests and gaps in knowledge and content were turned into relevant content and a compendium of resources that was available via the Coady's learning platform and in a consolidated document. Content includes research on decolonizing pedagogies, intersectionality, strategies for instruction and student engagement in the learning process. Estey and Johnson provided suggestions for incorporating this content and practices into existing courses, and Kraglund-Gauthier, a core staff member of the Coady, delivered an introductory session about universal design for learning (UDL). Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART) services were provided in an accessible space to facilitate access for presenters and participants.

A follow-up survey revealed the importance of this shared content and learning opportunity. Coady staff appreciated the content and opportunity to learn more about the rights and responsibilities connected to international and provincial legislation and being introduced to the basics of UDL. Requests for more time to review the content with the developers and more training in UDL were common feedback. In response to the feedback, Kraglund-Gauthier and Johnson designed and delivered three additional lunch-time workshops. The first hour-long session was a “deeper dive” on the content developed and how it might be integrated in existing and future courses. The second and third sessions focused on UDL. Additionally, Coady’s support staff asked for tailor-made workshops related to improving access to future participants.

Additional Staff Feedback

As part of the internal program evaluation process, attendees of the sessions completed a feedback survey that was designed to gather information about the perceived usefulness of the workshops, how the information gathered might be applied, and recommendations that could be applied in organizational planning and practice moving forward.

Overall, respondents said the workshops helped to shift and expand their thinking related to accessible learning and in modelling this work. Their words revealed their deep thinking of the broader concepts of and their application of knowledge gained:

“The session with Steve and Pamela was positively inspirational. While I am committed to making all spaces for open and inclusive of all learners, I was really inspired to take it to a new level. The session on universal design gave me practical ways in which I could do this.”

“Pamela and Wendy are great facilitators who walk the talk. They demonstrate through their interactions with all how we can implement UDL to enhance our work. ... This is incredibly important for society not only for the [Coady].”

“It was important to my thinking to link the concepts of universal design for building access to the teaching and learning environment. I was unaware of the connections and this provided me with a better frame to link into aspects of practice.”

“The final session provided useful content on approaches and particularly the on-going challenges to fully integrate universal design...including issues of intersectionality around gender, race, etc. I appreciated the opportunity to use the online components and bring in voices from afar working on the issue.”

“I found the background and intro very eye-opening. All 3 sessions provided me with some very useful tools and approaches.”

Others highlighted the importance of looking at inclusive practices and accessibility at all levels of the organization’s activities. For example, as one respondent noted:

“These sessions allowed me to see not only the importance of inclusion but the necessity for inclusive practices in everything we do at the Coady—starting with recruitment and the processing of applications, to the way we teach in the classroom and the student services we provide.”

Respondents provided recommendations that considered increasing accessibility and engaging and learning from persons living with disabilities:

“Finding better ways to talk about and acknowledge the exclusion that is embedded in our systems in a way that does not further marginalize people would be extremely helpful. Opening spaces for authentic learning without judgment is difficult to do and we all need to be supported in our efforts. Thank you both for your leadership in this regard.”

“Continue to provide examples and cases that are disrupting and breaking through the barriers [and] strategies for the classroom that would help in adapting experiential learning activities to include PWDs. Interested in further content that helps surface the invisible barriers to learning in adult education spaces so that inclusivity can go deeper.”

“I would like to see the Coady develop policies or at least follow the policies set out by the university when it comes to providing accommodation to PWDs. Perhaps we could also research funding options that would allow us to provide these accommodations?”

“Continue to provide interaction with people with lived experience, either in person, through reading material, videos, etc.”

Respondents also provided suggestions for improved content and programming, and provided suggestions related to funding and policy development.

Deliverables to Date

Embedding the project’s deliverables into the Coady’s programming and practices was identified from the literature reviewed as an effective way to minimize the gaps in facilitators’ and staff members’ knowledge, skills, teaching practices, and attitudes concerning PWDs. From this, an online compendium of content and delivery of workshops that focused on validated and practical strategies associated with teaching practices that model best practice with respect to integrating the material and using UDL principles in the classroom was developed. Other workshops were designed and delivered to practitioners across the province to garner additional feedback on content. The following is a list of all deliverables that have emerged from this innovation.

Book Chapter (peer-reviewed)

Johnson, P., Kraglund-Gauthier, W. L., & Houston, B. (2019). Decolonizing the classroom in social justice learning: Perspectives on access and inclusion for participants living with disabilities. In P. Blessinger, J. Hoffman, & S. Makham (Eds.), *International perspectives in Higher Education: Strategies for Fostering Inclusive Classrooms* (Vol. 3, pp. 83–95). Kew Gardens, NY: Emerald. [Target book release: February 2019]

External Workshops and Presentations (refereed)

Acker-Verney, J., Johnson, P., Kraglund-Gauthier, W. L., & Martin, C. (2017, June 17). *Using intersectionality to explore influences of gender, technology, and disability on post-secondary success and leadership: Four women academics challenging a singular idea*

of leadership. 1st International Conference on Leadership and Diversity. Halifax, Canada, June 15–17, 2017.

Kraglund-Gauthier, W. L. (2018, September 28). *Teaching above the digital line: Effective practices in online spaces*. SAMR Teaching and Learning Above the Line: Access for All South Shore Regional Centre for Education Conference, September 28–29, 2018, Oak Island, NS. Slide deck available from <https://drive.google.com/open?id=1U7GfTZAxvskRTH7BEyS3gbmVgwL0F68g>

Kraglund-Gauthier, W. L. (2018, November 6). *Universal Design for Learning: Connecting Accessibility and adult education*. Coady Connects Webinar Series, Coady International Institute, Antigonish, Canada. Recording available at <https://youtu.be/omYXSRk6pSg>

Kraglund-Gauthier, W. L. (2018, November 15). *Exploring UDL and adult learning principles to create inclusive digital spaces for all learners*. Literacy Nova Scotia's Professional Development Conference for Practitioners: Supporting Learning Needs of Adults. Truro, Canada. See <http://ns.literacy.ca/Nov2017-PDconf-Agenda.htm>

Internal Workshops and Presentations

Estey, S. (2017, July 6). *Disability, human rights, and development*.

Kraglund-Gauthier, W. L., & Johnson, P. (2017, September 8). *Universal Design for Learning in Coady classrooms*.

Kraglund-Gauthier, W. L. (2017, October 20). *Planning with UDL in mind. What does this mean for our practice?*

Internal theoretical and pedagogical content: Moodle Repository

A Moodle repository was created and was accessible to all Coady staff. This learning and resource space is a "living space" in that it can be added to and edited through conversations, innovations, and additions from the staff and participants of the Coady International Institute.

Content is organized around the following themes:

- Creating welcoming spaces through accommodation and access
- Reference Materials
- Gender and Disability
- Economic Inclusion of PWDs
- Advocacy, Activism and Disabled Person's Movements
- Disability and Climate Change
- Accessible and Inclusive Research
- Intersectionality and Disability
- Asset Based Community Development
- Disability and Displacement
- Universal Design for Learning (UDL)
- Youth Living with Disabilities

At the time of this report, the following content has been uploaded:

Documents	47
Web links	60
Discussion Forums	10

Conclusion

The expected benefits of this project are substantial in both immediate and long-term systemic impact. Through improved educational content and practices, we anticipate enhanced and more accessible experiences and support for persons living with disabilities and an improved ability to support an inclusive learning environment for all. Emphasis on incorporating the content could be reinforced through organization-wide practices that aim to promote the decolonization of the classroom. Other findings included the need for tailored learning depending on the audience and ensuring a modelling of improved accessibility by applying UDL to sessions. We have learned from the feedback of our colleagues that there are areas to further develop to deepen the learning and broaden the understandings and perspectives.

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