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**From study clubs to
co-operative inquiries:
Social learning at the
Coady International Institute**

Olga Gladkikh
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The Coady International Institute
St. Francis Xavier University
PO Box 5000
Antigonish, NS
Canada B2G 2W5

Phone: (902) 867-3960
Phone: 1-866-820-7835 (within Canada)
Fax: (902) 867-3907
Web: www.coady.stfx.ca
Email: coady@stfx.ca

From study clubs to co-operative inquiries: Social learning at the Coady International Institute

This occasional paper reflects on the rich experience gathered over the past decade of using co-operative inquiry methodology at the Coady International Institute. It describes the rationale behind and the evolution of the adult learning process, and identifies some of the key learnings drawn from participant and Coady staff feedback which will be of use to other adult educators, especially those working in university contexts.

Over the past decade, the use of co-operative inquiry methodology has become an integral part of the Diploma Program in Development Leadership. It has also been adopted for use in other classroom-based, online and blended educational offerings such as the Global Women Change Leaders and Indigenous Women's Leadership Programs, and has been adapted by graduates for use in their own organizations.

Being a member of a co-operative inquiry group involves learning collaboratively with others in face-to-face conversations where ideas emerge, are articulated, shared, responded to, challenged and expanded in a shared space. There is not a one-size-fits-all prescription for being in an inquiry group; each experience is different – groups are set up differently, govern themselves differently, research and share different information, respond differently to that information, and gain different insights. No two groups are ever the same. As a social learning methodology, however, cooperative inquiry groups have proven their usefulness in finding answers for burning questions and enabling meaningful engagement with others with shared interests.

The Coady International Institute's Roots in Adult Education

The Coady Institute's approach to adult learning is grounded in its historical roots in the Antigonish Movement and the work of the Extension Department at St. Francis Xavier University. The Antigonish Movement was a social movement that combined adult education and organizing for economic action. It evolved from the pioneering work of Rev. Dr. Moses Coady and Rev. Jimmy Tompkins in the 1920s in response to the poverty afflicting farmers, fishers, miners, and other disadvantaged groups in Eastern Canada.

Dr. Coady and his associates used a practical strategy of adult education and group action that began with the immediate economic needs of the local people. The approach emphasized respect for the individual and the belief that a participatory group process based on adult education and socio-economic cooperation were the most effective ways to bring about social change. One of the key methods they used was the promotion of local study groups or study clubs.

Between 1928 - 1959, thousands of study clubs were formed throughout the region by disadvantaged groups to discuss common problems, and to create solutions that used "what they have to secure what they have not" (Coady, 1939, p. 163) to address the poverty and injustice they experienced in their everyday lives. These social learning groups became the catalysts for social, economic and political change in the Maritimes, and led to the organization of citizen-led enterprises such as credit unions

and marketing and producer co-operatives. The leadership skills they learned also contributed to the strengthening of the labor movement in the region (Dodaro & Pluta, 2012).

Today the Coady Institute continues this practice of bringing people together to explore common questions or concerns and to make sense of new ideas for future action. Since 1959, experienced development practitioners from around the world have been coming to Antigonish to attend the Coady's campus-based diploma and certificate programs which focus on building the capacity of citizens to organize and mobilize to play a key role in their own development.

The Institute uses a variety of adult education methods to engage with its widely diverse cohorts of adult learners. Building on the methods of the Antigonish Movement and other influences, the Coady's approach over the years has evolved to encompass a more transformative, pedagogical orientation to motivate more critically oriented participants who recognize social injustice, and who strive to transform inequitable, undemocratic, or oppressive institutions and social relations.

For example, the ideas of Paulo Freire, which are deeply critical of the wider influences that constrain people's emancipation, have resonance in the context of the reality of peoples' lives who are participants at the Coady Institute. Freire advocated conscientization (coming to consciousness of the social, political and economic forces that affect individuals and communities) as a goal of education. Learning is not the 'eating' of false words, it is not programming; learning is about problematizing by raising questions. The subject matter is the life situation of the learner. The goal is emancipation through self-reflective learning where individuals (and potentially groups) are able to identify the disabling and disempowering barriers to taking action for change and social transformation (Freire, 1970).

It is in this context and this tradition that the facilitation team has been adapting its own approach over the past decade to an adult learning and research process called co-operative inquiry.

What is Co-operative Inquiry?

"Co-operative inquiry is a way of working with other people who have similar concerns and interests to yourself in order to: (1) understand your world, make sense of your life, and develop new and creative ways of looking at things; and (2) learn how to act to change things you may want to change, and find out how to do things better" (Heron & Reason, 2001, p.179).

Co-operative inquiry is an educational method that is driven more by learners' questions than by teachers' lessons. Coined by pioneers like Heron (1996) and Reason (1999), co-operative inquiry is rooted in the recognition that "ordinary" people (like Gramsci's (1971) "organic intellectuals" see also Mayo, 1999) have the ability to learn together, to test their assumptions, and to create new meaning that will benefit their lives directly. The learning process does not need to remain in the control of experts such as academics, or be facilitated by them. In co-operative inquiry, group members set their own research objectives and are active agents of their own learning, driving the inquiry process. They are both co-inquirers and co-subjects in their own learning, and as such own the results of their inquiry. Instructors act more as coaches or guides to help learners arrive at their "true" questions and the things they really care about.

This action learning methodology has been used in the fields of education, community development and organizational studies, and has emerged as an innovative way for small groups to develop new insights and connections between theory and practice. Much of the literature on co-operative inquiry involves using the method to improve practice in the workplace, or to solve issues in organizational management and governance so they often take place over an extended period of time (six months to one year).

Inquiries usually consist of four phases: an **initiation phase** where group members come together to discuss individual interests and identify burning questions for exploration; an **information phase** which often begins with sharing stories about experiences related to the main focus of the inquiry to draw out common threads, and moves to sharing information drawn from other primary or secondary sources (books, videos, online sources, etc.); a **reflection phase** where participants collaboratively try to make meaning of their own and each other's contributions; and an **action phase** where the members revisit their objectives and decide on the next action steps to achieve them – this may include identifying additional research questions for members to explore.

Co-operative inquiries can be informal or formal and can take different forms – outside and inside inquiries, for example. Heron & Reason (2001) describe an **outside inquiry** as being:

“... about what goes on in group members' working and/or personal lives, or in some special project, outside the group meetings. So the group comes together for the reflection phases to share data, make sense of it, revise their thinking and, in light of all this, plan the next action phase. Group members disperse for each action phase which is undertaken on an individual basis out there in the world” (p.182).

An **inside inquiry**, on the other hand, is one in which the information gathering, reflection and action phases occur *“when the group is together in the same space”* (such as the same workplace or, in the case of the Coady Institute, the same Diploma Program) where *“some phases of the inquiry may involve each person doing their own individual activity side-by-side with everyone else or paired with a partner ...”* (Heron & Reason, 2001, p. 182).

One of the few to use co-operative inquiry in a university setting is the Research Center for Leadership in Action (RCLA) at the Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, New York University. It brings together community leaders from social change organizations across the United States in an outside inquiry format. These leaders meet over the course of a year before completing a report on their inquiry, published by RCLA. Their questions focus on different aspects of leadership such as: *“How can we be more effective in helping others become more strategic, conceptual and creative in their thinking? How and when does art release, create and transform power for social change? How do we raise money to develop sustainable social change organizations?”* (Ospina, El Hadidy & Hofmann-Pinilla, 2008, p. 145 & 146).

Ospina et al. (2008), reflecting on RCLA's experience of integrating co-operative inquiry within its research agenda, draw attention to the *“academic-practitioner divide”* and the challenges of overcoming it within a university context. The authors identify those challenges as: *“Who owns the knowledge that is produced – the academics or the practitioners involved in the co-operative inquiry? Will the process and product meet university standards with respect to ethics, relevance and quality? Will it encourage other academic institutions to use co-operative inquiry to fulfill larger social commitments?”* (p.132). These questions provide new vistas for research, given that researchers, practitioners and academics

have long been recognized to belong to separate communities with different values and ideologies that impede their progress in working co-operatively (Rynes, Bartunek & Daft, 2001).

For the Coady Institute, the adoption of co-operative inquiry methodology provided a rich opportunity to explore the capacity and willingness of participants and the facilitation team to come together in a university setting as a community of learners to co-create new knowledge for social change.

Why Co-operative Inquiry?

"If the structure does not permit dialogue the structure must be changed." Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970)

The Institute decided to include co-operative inquiry in its redesigned Diploma Program in Community Development Leadership in 2006. In the past, the Institute's Diploma Program comprised mandatory and elective courses, each with a learning design negotiated with participants at the beginning of each course. During mid-term and end-of-program evaluations, participants often said they appreciated the overall program, but felt they did not have the chance to delve more deeply into specific questions and issues across country contexts, or to share approaches to common problems they face in the sectors in which they work.

The facilitation team began to explore ways to incorporate more opportunities for social learning and collaborative research in the Diploma Program which could address these concerns and be driven by the participants themselves.

After examining various participatory inquiry-based methods (such as action research, participatory action research, appreciative inquiry), the facilitation team found co-operative inquiry to be a good fit with the Coady's approach to adult learning – it promotes critical thinking, acknowledges and validates the rich experience participants bring with them, and enables them to take command of their own learning.

Given the nature of the Coady's global learning community, however, the facilitation team had to develop its own approach to conducting co-operative inquiry to enable its diverse cohorts of experienced community development leaders to use the methodology effectively to "create really useful knowledge" (Johnson, 1980, pp. 21-22) through their interactions. It was expected that engaging in this approach to social learning would not only result in change at the individual level, but would also have the potential to change the broader communities and organizations within which graduates work when they return home (Reed et al., 2010) and apply their learnings. It was hoped their co-operative analysis and search for solutions would promote collective action on issues that cross borders such as human trafficking, climate change, conflict or globalization

Designing a Co-operative Inquiry Format

"To teach is not to transfer knowledge but to create the possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge." Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of Freedom (1998)

Using a hybrid of the interior and exterior inquiry models, the facilitation team had to adapt various aspects of the format and methodology of using co-operative inquiry to fit within the structure of the Coady's Diploma Program from year to year. These adaptations included the following:

Creating the groups: To create the inquiry groups, the facilitation team adapted Open Space Technology (OST), a process developed by Harrison Owen (1992) to enable individuals to take responsibility for leading discussions on topics of common interest. Before the first inquiry, participants received an orientation to OST and the co-operative inquiry process itself. Participants also received help from peers in developing a "good" inquiry question and presenting it to others to motivate interest in an initial discussion. "Good" inquiry questions were defined as not having simple yes/no answers or a recipe for success; they are specific, context-based and the answers are not already known within the group (Coady International Institute, 2014).

One to two weeks before each inquiry, the Diploma group gathered for the Open Space session to present their burning questions for others' consideration and to create the Marketplace of Ideas (identifying where and when each question would be discussed). Participants were free to move within this marketplace to join different discussion groups. Group convenors submitted a one-page report outlining the key points raised during the discussion about their burning questions. These reports were posted on the wall, reviewed in plenary and voted on by participants using a dotmocracy process to identify the top eight or nine topics which would move forward as an inquiry group. A dotmocracy involves distributing a limited number of dots, in this case three, for participants to use as votes for their favorite options. Participants would then sign up for one of these groups. Questions or topics which were not selected could be raised again during the Open Space for the next inquiry.

Length and number of inquiries: To suit the structure of the Diploma Program, the facilitation team initially agreed a one-week (five day) inquiry format should be used, with groups presenting their learnings to the plenary on a sixth day the following week. During the week, group members would meet in the mornings to share experiences and reflect on their new learnings, then decide on next steps for action; afternoons were free for information-gathering or further discussion depending on the wishes of the group. They could also propose other timeframes to meet if agreed upon by the members.

For the first year co-operative inquiry was used (in 2006), space was created for five one-week inquiries throughout the 23-week program (the first three were mandatory; the last two were electives). By the fourth and fifth inquiry it was clear interest among participants had waned as numbers dropped off significantly in favor of other course-based electives (see Appendix 4). In the end-of-program evaluation, both participants and Coady staff said they felt five inquiries were too many. After trying various options with respect to the length and number of inquiries over the years, two four-day co-operatives inquiries are now conducted within a shorter 20-week Diploma with groups presenting their learnings on the fifth day.

Number and size of groups: Since all Diploma participants would be required to join a co-operative inquiry, the number of groups depended on the size of the cohort which could range anywhere from 40-60 people. Due to limitations in the physical space for groups to meet and the staff resources available to join them, setting a maximum of nine inquiry groups was necessary, usually consisting of between four to eight members. The consensus among group theorists is that smaller groups, those of eight or less, tend to be more cohesive and productive than larger groups (Cranton, 2012).

Outputs and grading: To assess learning the first year co-operative inquiry was used in 2006, participants were required to write a joint report (worth 60%) describing their shared learnings and suggestions for future action around the question under consideration. Groups also had to share their learnings with others at the end of the week and moderate a 10-minute question and answer session. From the feedback received, participants felt there was too little time to produce the outputs required. The short time frame to meet the deadline (essentially a weekend) raised their levels of stress and anxiety; some groups had difficulty coming together to produce a group report which then fell on the shoulders of one or two members of the group to complete. As a result, the Institute dropped the requirement for a group report and replaced it with an individual reflection (worth 35%), and a mark for the presentation of group learnings (25%). The presentation format evolved over the years from being a method prescribed by the facilitation team to one of the group's choosing and has included socio-dramas, posters, PowerPoints, debates and panels, and more recently, webinars and podcasts. Assessment of an individual's overall participation in the inquiry remained the same at 40% comprising a combination of peer (20%), self (10%) and Coady staff (10%) assessments of participation.

Staff training: As co-operative inquiry methodology was new to everyone on the facilitation team they had questions about the role the Coady staff member should play in the inquiry group. Does s/he need to be a topic expert to be assigned to a group? Would the person be more easily accepted as a member if s/he weren't an expert? Would an expert end up taking over the group's inquiry and turning it into a typical seminar? It was decided not to match staff with expertise to topic areas, but to have them participate as a co-learner or co-researcher. The role of Coady staff assigned to a group would be to act more as a coach or guide, rather than come to class with a structured lesson plan. Staff would still be available outside of class time as possible information resources for other groups to interview, after they had explored their own experiences with the questions they have raised. A staff and a participant handbook on co-operative inquiry were created to help all those involved to understand the underlying theory, as well as how to operationalize the process during the seminars.

Coady staff and associates were also encouraged to gather each day whenever possible after their groups had met to reflect on what happened, and to identify any challenges with group dynamics and the process itself – essentially conducting our own co-operative inquiry about co-operative inquiry and discussing whether it was indeed a good fit with the Institute's educational approach and objectives. These gatherings provided a rich opportunity to systematically capture our learnings about the inquiry process over time, and to identify the implications they had for our future practice as adult educators.

An Empowering Process of Co-operative Inquiry: What we've learned

"Knowledge emerges only through invention and reinvention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other." Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970)

Drawing on participant assignments and course evaluations, as well as on the reflections of Coady staff and associates involved in the inquiries over the years (collected by the author from 2005-2014), several key learnings have emerged that relate to the benefits and challenges of using this social learning process to engage adult learners.

Effectiveness of storytelling

Storytelling has a long history at the Coady Institute as it taps into the wealth of knowledge and experience each practitioner brings with them. For co-operative inquiry groups, sharing stories about their burning questions, and subsequently making sense of them, was central to the process. This ability to collectively reflect experiences related to practices and construct shared understanding is important for learning (Vince & Warren, 2013).

By using structured story-dialogue methodology (see Appendix 2 for an explanation), participants found common threads or themes of interest in their stories to explore further during their research. The amount of time spent on storytelling varied from group to group; some moved quickly to the literature, while others spent most of the time going deeper in unpacking their related experiences and critically reflecting on them.

As one participant put it, "It is very enriching to draw from other's experiences. We were able to gather relevant information from storytelling to research further."

Another said, "The most significant learning was from the discussions with each other, sharing experiences from different backgrounds and various places. From the personal sharing we could really get to the depth of issues particularly found in one's area of operation."

For Coady associate Nanci Lee, storytelling helped to reverse the normal power (teacher/student) dynamics in the classroom:

"I really felt that the process encouraged an inversion of the typical class. Existing knowledge (that came from the group) was much more the starting point in this process than what I have seen or experienced even in participatory style facilitation. Why? I think the stories and their collective deconstruction were crucial for that inversion. The storytelling was fascinating to me. I wondered what the implications were for the range of storytelling processes that unfolded in the different groups. The various ways that each group chose to do it" (personal communication, August 2006)

Striking a balance of power

At the outset, given that co-operative inquiry was new to both Coady participants and the facilitation team, perceptions and understandings about individual roles needed reorienting for everyone involved.

There were different experiences with this among the staff team. Most found being a co-learner/co-inquirer instead of a content expert leading the process challenging, especially knowing when to step in and guide the group, or leave control of the group's process in the hands of participants. One Coady associate said she literally sat on her hands to remind herself to let participants lead the process. Some felt when they stepped back too far, the group spent the entire time arguing over process, or did not spend enough time reflecting on the meaning of their stories, the research they had done, and how it related to their practice.

Some groups expected staff members to be more actively engaged in the discussions and to express their views, not just to sit back and listen. This proved a challenge for Coady staff as well who were unsure how much involvement they should have. Others had a different view. "I personally resist processes that ask for me to be completely absent in terms of my own thinking and inputs. It can even be a bit condescending to assume that I have the power to sway or lead" (N. Lee, personal communication, August 2006).

Rotating moderators from among the group was suggested as a way to enable all participants to practice and enhance their skills in chairing and facilitating a social learning group. The problem, however, was that participants often lacked these skills, especially during the first inquiry. Some who were not skilled in moderating/facilitating ended up simply being a "traffic cop" deciding who should speak and when; others were unable to link idea threads, or deal with conflict in the group when perspectives clashed. Ultimately, it was left up to the Coady staff member to raise the possibility of using a rotating moderator with the group and to decide who would manage the process; some chose not to, some did.

Coady associate Dr. Wilf Bean (personal communication, November 2006) said he often took more control in the initial set up of the inquiry and kept control until he had a sense of the group dynamics, at which point he'd encourage a moderator to take over. The timing of this varied from group to group depending on a variety of factors such as the subject under discussion, the size and make-up of the group (see Appendix 1 for details). Other staff encouraged their groups to identify new moderators for each day of the inquiry at the beginning.

Some staff said they aimed to be *animators*, *i.e.* striking a balance between helping the group find information resources and suggesting ways to keep the conversation and the analysis going, while trying not to sway participants with their views. Those who had an opportunity to be involved in several inquiries found that by the time participants came to the second or third co-operative inquiry everyone was much more comfortable with the process and how to maintain this balance. Group members also relied less on Coady staff.

Broad topics for discussion

The first inquiry of the year often suffered from groups choosing topics that were too broad and took a long time to narrow down. Although Coady staff were encouraged not to take control over the direction of the inquiry, this was sometimes necessary when members needed help to focus their research questions. This usually involved helping the group identify similar themes in the stories they shared on the first day using a mind map or concept map to draw out linkages. Groups often got better at doing this themselves once they became familiar with the five-day process and its limitations (i.e. setting workable objectives for the time allotted).

Sometimes groups lost focus during the information gathering stage and ended up having too much information which could feel overwhelming. Some staff found groups did not take the time to process the information they had gathered and seemed to expect them to do that. Others had to really push for critical analysis asking, "How is this knowledge relevant to your work? How will it affect your practice? How will you apply these new learnings in your work or organization?" These questions did not always crop up naturally; group members did not seem to easily make the connection between the outcome of inquiry and how to apply their new learnings at home without prompting.

Group dynamics

Individual differences among group members presented various challenges for the co-operative inquiry process. Some were eager to explore the "flexibility" of the process, while others wanted things to move in a more methodical way. This caused clashes in some groups. For example, clashes were seen in groups where task-oriented people were mixed with more process-oriented people, and the members could not find common ground on how to proceed. In these groups, Coady staff usually had to intervene to get the group back on track.

One staff member observed that when group members had experience with the question being explored, "the subsequent storytelling and discussion is rich and motivation is higher." Others found when participants had little experience or mixed levels of experience with the topic, it was a challenge to ensure all voices were heard, and that those with experience did not dominate or set the direction of the inquiry. A participant in this kind of group said, "Different levels of baseline information made it challenging to move on ... [there was] a biased attitude towards [the] information provided ... thinking it to be a show of superiority [in] knowledge." (2014 course evaluation comment)

When dominators are in a group, staff found it a challenge to discretely reinforce the group's ground rules (usually set on the first day of the inquiry) without shutting someone down, while also allowing space for quieter or shy voices. For some, reminding participants about previous discussions during the Diploma about governance, power, control, collaboration etc., helped to set the tone and deal with dominators. Staff members were also encouraged to revisit the community ground rules and to suggest ways to ensure everyone has an opportunity to contribute to the discussions. One staff member, for example, introduced an exercise to his group called the X-Y Game (see Appendix 3 for an explanation) to draw attention to the impact of competition versus co-operation on group dynamics. It helped some members to see how their behavior choices affected others, but unfortunately did not result in any tangible change in the "difficult" behavior of one participant, i.e. arriving late and dominating others. Group members still deferred to him and his point of view due to his "good ideas" (A. Struchkov, personal communication, December 18, 2012).

Most Coady staff and associates found that a contributing factor to the dynamics of the group was the number of people in it. They reported smaller groups, between four and six people, more conducive to “genuine storytelling” and being able to “deconstruct” the underlying frames and assumptions upon which knowledge is constructed (Dr. W. Bean, reflection notes, 2006). In larger groups, it was a challenge to ensure all voices are heard and that a few people do not take over the discussion.

Dominators also had an impact beyond the group experience. In later inquiries, as people became more familiar with others in their cohort, they said they sometimes based their choice of which inquiry group to join on who was or *wasn't* in the group – putting aside their preferred choice of inquiry topic in favor of avoiding possible conflict, or to be with others who will let their voices be heard.

Dealing with emotions

Strong emotions can arise during a group’s exploration of sensitive subjects such as gender based violence, ethnic or religious conflict that may touch very personally on participants’ lives. The ability of group members to deal with emotions such as anger, hurt, frustration varied considerably from group to group. In some groups, participants avoided revealing personal experiences; in others, members opened up and told very personal and emotional stories about how they, their families and communities had been affected. Coady staff observed that when members of a group knew each other well, particularly in later inquiries, they helped one another deal with the emotions which arose. For example, this author was part of a co-operative inquiry group in 2010 that dealt with the questions: Why should we forgive and forget those who hurt us and others in our society? The members from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya and Canada each told a story of an atrocity they had either experienced or seen, eliciting tears of shared sorrow and words of anger at what had occurred. Acknowledging and respecting those emotions, and providing comfort and support to one another, were key to helping the group unpack their feelings and start researching ways to channel them into positive action. This required a great deal of shared trust among group members which did not always occur in other groups (O. Gladkikh, personal communication, October 2010). Some staff felt four members in a group were “ideal” for sensitive topics such as this as smaller groups were more conducive to personal and intimate sharing.

Trusting the process

Each year, as new staff and associates joined the facilitation team, there was some anxiety about their ability to facilitate such a “chaotic” and “unplanned” process led by participants with varying abilities and learning styles. Some staff tended to default to their own comfort level and lead a more formal seminar. Similarly, some participants felt unsure about others in their group and their ability to contribute meaningfully to their inquiry.

Co-operative inquiry aims to develop critical perspectives on secondary sources of information as well as on personal experiences and views. Some Coady staff, however, found group members merely skimmed the literature looking for what reinforced their point of view. Others found some groups relied more on researching secondary resources such as books, journals and the internet, than exploring the wealth of information available from others in their group or cohort. In some cases, members abandoned their own experience and interpretation in light of what “authority” figures wrote on the subject. In others, once group members looked at the literature they realized their assumptions were

not as accurate as they had thought and it led them to rethink their own situation in a more positive light.

Staff involved report they sometimes had to remind group members to recognize their own and others' experience as having "value," and to continue building confidence in group members to see themselves as valuable resource people. Coady associate Dr. Maureen Coady put it this way: "Co-operative inquiry puts people in the often uncomfortable position of seeing themselves as knowers until they come to realization that what they know counts, and that they can be part of co-constructing knowledge for change" (M. Coady, personal communication, March 4, 2015).

Another associate found her group realized "the expertise was in the room" when they could not find much literature on their research question about love and marriage in their various contexts (M. Ryan, personal communication, 2008).

It has been a key learning for both Coady staff and participants to let go of their fears and insecurities, to co-create a co-operative space for learning, and to trust that the process will unfold as it should.

Assessing individual learning

Each year, participants have found it challenging to balance the purpose of the inquiry (to gain new insights and develop group learning skills) with the need to produce the required outputs to earn a mark towards their Diploma. Similarly, staff involved reported difficulty in assessing whether individual learning had taken place or not; as a result, some had difficulty assigning a grade to that learning. They repeatedly noticed on the third or fourth day of the inquiry, groups shifted from a genuine inquiry process to becoming more focused on the educational outputs required by the Institute. According to Coady associate Nanci Lee (personal communication, 2006), "the process lost some of its richness when the groups began to think about products ... the limited time seems to reduce rather than distill the learnings ... and the nature of the products can themselves be a bit reductionist."

The individual papers submitted by participants were often too focused on descriptions of new knowledge (what they learned), with not enough analysis or reflection on what their learning means for them (its relevance) and how they will apply what they have learned in their living and working contexts. One staff member suggested extending the time set aside for the inquiry by another five days or even longer "for the process to really unfold, and the ideas to germinate and mature" (N. Lee, personal communication, 2006).

When more than one co-operative inquiry was offered, participants were encouraged to carry on their research and discussions in the next round of inquiries if they felt they had more to share and learn. Some groups did so, reuniting, perhaps with new recruits, to go deeper in developing their understanding around topics such as the lack of participation of youth in development (2007), discrimination against people living with HIV and AIDS (2008), and climate change (2014). These groups assessed their own learning as being very rich, and they appreciated the opportunity to explore a topic fully before moving to action when they return home. One Coady associate said her group, which was looking at care and support for people living with HIV and AIDS, was also more respectful and willing to recognize one another's expertise on a topic they had worked together on before (M. Messer-Chiang, personal communication, 2008). A participant from that group noted in the evaluation, "Everyone in

my group participated enthusiastically, shared their experiences and demonstrated with passion what needs to be done to address the situation.”

Scheduling of co-operative inquiries

Over the past decade, the Institute has made various changes in the number of inquiries, when they were offered, and the whether they were mandatory or elective (see Appendix 4). These changes were the result of a combination of participant and staff feedback, as well as a reduction in the length of the Diploma Program from 23 to 19 weeks in 2010.

When only one co-operative inquiry was offered in 2012 and 2013, some participants found placing it at the end of the program enabled them to explore questions of common concern in a more “relaxed way,” especially after an intense four months of mandatory and elective courses. Others said there were too many other demands near the end of the program that vied for their energy and attention, including “thinking about packing” to go home. In evaluations, many participants supported the idea of increasing the number of inquiries and changing when they occur in the program. As a result in 2014, a mandatory co-operative inquiry was added half-way through the Diploma; a second inquiry was made an elective, but remained at the end of the program.

The Usefulness of Co-operative Inquiry as a Social Learning Methodology for Development Leaders

Participant learning from the experience

Whether participants were involved in one, two or several inquiries, it did not seem to affect their evaluation of the co-operative inquiry experience and its relevance to their learning. Participants consistently gave high ratings to their group research experience, both in terms of how conducive it was to finding answers to their burning questions, and to enabling meaningful engagement with others who share their interests. As one participant said, “This is the best group discussion that I ever had at Coady.”

The participants were asked the following questions during the evaluation:

- Was the week-long group seminar conducive to your learning?
- How would you rate the overall learning of your group?
- Do you have any suggestions to improve the co-operative inquiry process?

Below is a representative sample of comments drawn from participants’ course evaluations over the years:

“This co-operative inquiry was really interesting because it gave me enough space and freedom to discuss divergent views. More so, the sharing of the group enhanced my understanding of my situation better. It has stimulated my analytical mind a little further.” (2014 course evaluation).

"The participatory group method strengthened my interpersonal communication and critical thinking skills and was an opportunity to share experiences and knowledge with colleagues on identifying challenges we will meet and to develop strategies that we will use to achieve development and social change." (2013 course evaluation).

"Each person in the group shared experiences and knowledge and this cumulative learning broadened my vision and updated my learning. The group learning had a synergic benefit and created a conducive environment for learning." (2006 course evaluation).

Even in groups which experienced challenges with group dynamics and differences in views, participants still found they gained from the experience and understood the significance of their discussions to their own working contexts.



An example of a co-operative inquiry group poster presentation on women in leadership.

Evolving areas of interest

The burning questions raised by Diploma participants over the years have reflected the changing and complex issues they face in their current working contexts and communities (see Appendix 4). For example, from 2006-9, the HIV/AIDS epidemic made regular appearances as groups discussed stigmatization, care and support, and living positively with HIV. The topic did not reappear until 2012 when the focus turned to AIDS orphans and how to support child-headed households.

In the past decade, groups explored various issues related to the participation and rights of women, children and youth in development, as well as conflict and the environment. Their burning questions reflected the changing language associated with changing times. For example, key questions around environmental sustainability (2006), gave way to questions about global warming (2007), disaster management (2008), climate change (2011) and food security (2014).

Some topics required champions to push them forward for consideration. This was the case in 2009 and 2014 when the concerns of people living with disabilities became topics for discussion, as well as

in 2011 when attention was turned to the discrimination faced by the LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning) community in many countries.

These changing areas of interest have provided the facilitation team with a clear window on what is important in participants' lives, and suggested areas for the Institute's educational programming to evolve to keep up to date with their realities.

Adaptability to the Workplace

In their individual assignments, participants were asked to reflect on their co-operative inquiry experience and the relevance and applicability of the process to their working context with colleagues and communities. Participants often positively assessed the potential usefulness of the social learning process to discuss and problem-solve around organizational and/or topical contextual issues of concern.

"I find co-operative inquiry is a strong technique to be used in my operational area to develop and support community groups. It is a participatory and practical approach/process because it engages each member of the group to share and contribute to building knowledge for practice" (2012 course evaluation).

A 2014 Diploma graduate and his group explored how to end corruption in their countries. In his individual assignment, he described the relevance of the process to his learning and future actions:

"The process is significantly important and relevant to independent learning. It promotes internalization of what I studied, and through this I realized that I've not carried the banner of anti-corruption [in the past] to make changes. I actually discovered how much more I could do using this method of learning to engage people and build alliances towards change" (Individual reflection paper, 2014).

When he returns the participant plans to "tackle corruption at both the micro and macro level" and "use this method of learning to engage people and build alliances towards change."

Over the years, the Coady Institute has received anecdotal reports from graduates who have returned to their communities and organizations and initiated co-operative inquiry groups. These include:

For example, a graduate of the 2006 Women's Leadership Certificate started two women's leadership groups. "The first group are teachers, psychologists and heads of the social services team...another is a group of 12 women...Our [co-operative inquiry] topic is how can we promote gender equality in our work or projects?" (personal correspondence, n.d.).

Kuldeep Singh (a 2012 Diploma graduate) is regional coordinator for four projects in Central India. When he returned, he brought project staff together in a co-operative inquiry on self-help groups and community-based organizations and the programs which help them. They explored the efficacy of Annasheree Yojna, a government of Delhi program to provide direct cash transfers to poor women to buy rations (Coady International Institute, Graduate Survey, 2013).

Until recently, however, there has been no systematic collection of feedback on co-operative inquiry to determine whether the experience has influenced graduates to directly adopt, adapt or dismiss the process to fulfill their ongoing learning needs, as well as those of their colleagues and communities.



A poster presentation on environmental justice.

Conclusion and Challenge to Educators

"Inquiry ... requires more than simply answering questions or getting a right answer. It espouses investigation, exploration, search, quest, research, pursuit and study. It is enhanced by involvement with a community of learners, each learning from the other in social interaction."
(Kuhlthau, Maniotes & Caspari, 2007, p.2)

Over the past decade, the use of co-operative inquiry methodology has become an integral part of the Diploma Program. It has also been adopted for use in other classroom-based, online and blended educational offerings such as the Global Women Change Leaders and Indigenous Women's Leadership Programs, and been adapted by graduates for their own organizations.

Being a member of a co-operative inquiry group involves learning collaboratively with others in face-to-face conversations where ideas emerge, are articulated, shared, responded to, challenged and expanded in a shared space. There is not a one-size-fits-all prescription for being in an inquiry group; each experience is different – groups are set up differently, govern themselves differently, research and

share different information, respond differently to that information, and gain different insights. No two groups are ever the same.

Using co-operative inquiry has been a rich learning opportunity for everyone involved. In addition to researching and learning collaboratively about topics of common concern, participants and the facilitation team have become more familiar with the process and are better able:

As participants to:

- Open up and share experiences;
- Accept and appreciate their own and others' experiences as valuable sources of information
- Step into leadership roles and not assume the Coady staff member is an expert on the topic at hand or should lead the group
- Work collaboratively instead of competing for space or attention
- Become familiar with co-operative inquiry as a form of social learning, its limitations (i.e. time), and its purpose (to relate the knowledge gained to participants' living/working context)

As Coady staff to:

- Let go of the process and outcomes of the group
- Trust the process and the ability of participants to direct their own learning
- Find the right balance between being a coach/guide and a co-learner/co-researcher
- Be aware of group dynamics and what can help different groups work through individual differences
- Understand time limitations and how to help group members make effective use of their time together.

In conclusion, co-operative inquiry has proved to be a good fit with the Coady Institute's approach to education: its aim to develop critical thinking and practical skills for citizen-led development, and its desire to liberate the classroom to enable development leaders to claim space and design their own learning focus. It is challenging to do well, but it is worth doing, as evidenced by participant and staff feedback. The learning journey for the Coady Institute continues, but all educators and development leaders searching for innovative social learning methods to liberate their classrooms or their organizations should consider adapting co-operative inquiry to give participants the opportunity to take ownership for their learning.

Appendix 1

Reflections on the Co-operative Inquiry Process

Coady associate Dr. Wilf Bean was involved in four of the five co-operative inquiries first offered during the 2006 Diploma Program. The notes below are drawn from his reflections on the process as it unfolded. They show the evolution of his approach over time to challenges related to power and control, and to finding a balance between being seen as the “expert” in the group and being accepted as a member and co-learner.

Seminar #1: Human Rights (4 people in the group)

Day 1:

- Group began with storytelling of experiences and understanding of human rights in their life, work and in organizations
- Somewhat anxious over not having complete control over the process (“How can I work in a group when I don’t have a plan?”)
- Doing the “dance of facilitation” as everyone is looking to me for ideas and expertise

Day 2:

- Group is coming together and the process is gaining depth; everyone was co-operating and eager to contribute to the discussions

Day 3:

- Group is highly motivated; individuals are researching different aspects of human rights: for people with disabilities, women, children, in Sri Lanka
- Individuals retained their own focus of inquiry while sharing and adding depth to one another’s reported new information
- Began using a rotating moderator; there is less attention on my “expertise”; leadership is genuinely being shared
- A resource person with expertise was invited into the group to be interviewed

Day 4:

- Group continuing to work well but beginning to feel anxious over learning outputs required (group and individual reports and poster presentation)
- Dealt with group anxiety by going over what is expected, how it will be assessed

Seminar #2: Mobilizing Marginalized Peoples (9 people in group)

Day 1:

- There is a dominator who has taken over the voices of others in the group
- Have to play a central role in the facilitation; feel if I give up this leadership the others in the group will not be able to control the dominator, so we will not use a rotating moderator
- Will try to give the group a lot of input about the assignments during the week and encourage them to keep things recorded on flip charts

Day 3:

- Had to reiterate the ground rules and said we needed to hear from more voices ... a challenge with so many people in the group and a dominator
- One participant called upon another to respect the ground rules
- At the end of the day, the group positively evaluated the day's session

Seminar #3: Human Resources (8 people in group)

- Decided to hang on to the facilitator role for the first 2-3 days, until the real framework of the group is set up, and there is trust within the group, and co-operation, then if the group agrees we can use a rotating moderator

Seminar #4: Exit Strategies (4 people in group)

- Four people in a group is ideal for genuine storytelling and really deconstructing an experience
- No need for a rotating moderator with such a small group; group is happy to allow me to continue moderating; they do not expect me to be the "expert" on the topic

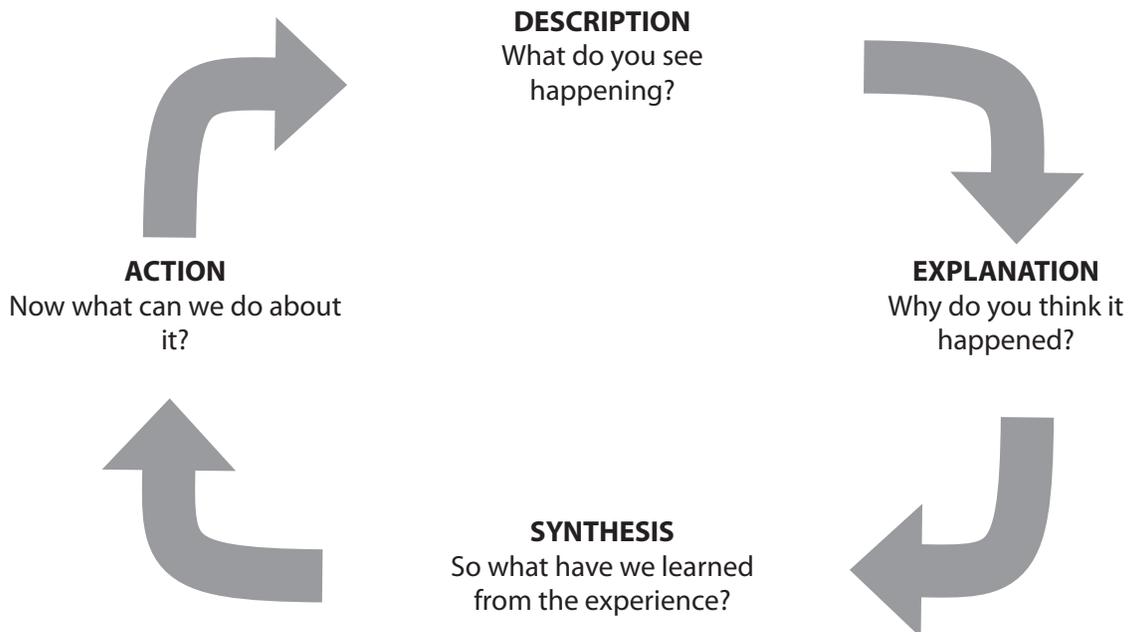
Appendix 2

The Story-Dialogue Method

The Story-Dialogue method is a structured dialogue technique which reinforces the belief that, as adults, we can learn a lot from our life experiences. The storytelling approach enables us to reflect upon our experience and then consider our future actions based on our new understanding. It is modelled from principles of adult learning and functions within the adult learning cycle. Stories, or narratives, are powerful ways to convey experience because only the narrator can give voice to the particularities and meanings that make up our lives (Labonte and Feather, 1996).

A structured dialogue is different from a discussion or conversation. Discussions often ramble around topics in an informal way. No effort is made to find lessons in the story. The dialogue in the Story-Dialogue Method is intentionally structured, to allow the storytelling to:

- Provide a detailed description of what happened (**Description**)
- Offer one or more explanations for what happened and why (**Explanation**)
- Synthesize the key lessons from our stories (**Synthesis**)
- Plan new actions based upon our insights (**Action**)



(Adapted from Labonte & Feather, 1996)

General steps for facilitating the story-dialogue method with seminar groups are outlined here:

1. Take care of group aspects of initiation first.
2. One member of the group can begin by telling a story based on her/his personal experience, centered on the seminar topic at hand.
3. When the storyteller is finished, summarize what happened for the group. Encourage participants to share their perspectives on why it happened. Consider its meaning within the topic at hand, and the root causes of the issue.
4. Lead the discussion based upon the question "What have we learned from this experience?" Have the group moderator or other designated note-taker record these insights with the group by writing key words boldly on flip charts or sheets of paper that can be posted on the wall for all to see.
5. Working together, derive themes from the key insights posted on the wall. Create clusters of themes.
6. From here, you may want to divide the themes into two more groupings: key factors that DIRECTLY have an impact the topic at hand, and factors that INDIRECTLY affect it.
7. Now it is time to ask the question, "So what? What can we do about it?" This should lead the group into a course of action for that day's research.

Appendix 3

X-Y Game – Co-operation vs Competition

The X-Y game is a commonly used exercise for the purpose of exploring the impact of co-operation vs competition among groups. It is a variation of the Prisoners Dilemma exercise. The lessons learned at the end of the description have been adapted for use by the Coady Institute.

Participants are divided into four groups. Each group is given two large sheets of paper, one of which has a very large letter 'X' written on it with a dark marker pen. On the other paper the letter 'Y' is written. You may choose to select any other two symbols that suit your participants. Thus each group has two sheets of paper, one with an X and one with a Y written on it (or two other appropriate symbols).

The participants are told the aim of the game is to improve their economic situation, and the way to earn money is to selectively put up an X or a Y when the signal is given by the facilitator. The rules for earning money are explained on the next page.

Any group that puts up an X or a Y after seeing what the other groups have put up will be penalized 100 currency points (whichever currency is suitable for that particular group of participants).

Possible combinations	Each group putting up an X wins/loses	Each group putting up a Y wins/loses
IF all four groups put up Xs	-100	
IF all three groups put up Xs and one group puts up a Y	+100	-300
IF two groups put up an X and two groups put up a Y	+100	-100
IF one group puts up an X and three groups put up Y	+300	-100
IF all four groups put up Y		+100

Any group that puts up both X and Y will be penalized 200 currency points. The facilitator may also penalize any group 100 currency points for any other behavior he/she considers to be in violation of the spirit/rules of the game. Only in this case, however, if such a ruling is seen to be too arbitrary, the penalized group may appeal to the other three groups, and their joint decision is final on whether this particular penalty is to be levied or not.

Since there are four groups, there are five different possible permutations/combinations (see table below). For example, three groups may put up a Y, and one group may put up an X. Or two groups may put up Ys and two groups may put up Xs. These options are given below, as well as the points each group will gain or lose depending on what the other groups have put up.

After the rules have been properly explained, the game begins. Sometimes participants want a trial round. This can be allowed. Once the real game starts, however, the facilitator must be very strict and

ensure that penalties for late display of the group's X or Y, or groups putting up both X and Y, or other such behavior is immediately marked on the group's score chart.

The score or money gained or lost by each group is continuously updated on the white/black board where everybody can see it.

After a few rounds have been played (a round consists of the facilitator counting to 3 and asking the groups to put up an X or a Y), and the scores displayed on the board, choose one participant from each group and ask the four of them to see whether they can come to any common strategy. When these four leave the room, the facilitator tells the other participants they do not need to follow the advice of their representative who has left the room as their aim is to make as much money as possible.

Have just two rounds after the representatives come back. Make sure to stop the game before all the groups begin to co-operate with each other by all of them putting up Ys. Total the scores for each group. Congratulate those who have won. Now lead the group in a reflection on the game. Draw out the following lessons from the game:

You will notice that while one group may have gained and another lost, the winning or losing is always at the expense of each other, never at the expense of the one who is running the game. If, however the groups had got together, then the one who was running the game would have lost money to make good gains made by all groups. Furthermore the rules of the game which penalized people for putting up their X or Y late or putting up both X and Y were also in favor of the one running the game, because any loss on these counts would be gains for the one running the game.

Thus the rules of the game, though apparently very just (who could fault them?) were subtly biased to make sure the one who has the most power, i.e., the one running the game, would almost always win. Connect this with societal and international processes (e.g. the World Trade Organization) where the rules seem just on the surface, but always are in favor of those who have power.

Furthermore, although all were free to join each other and defeat the facilitator who was running the game, the one who had power made sure that the 'poor' competed with each other. As a result if they did gain, it was always at the expense of each other, never at the expense of the one running the game. This was fostered by encouraging the participants to believe that it was a game of competition, rather than co-operation, and where making the most money (i.e. improving their economic situation, fulfilling their basic human needs) was the primary and most important goal, and healthy competition was the best and most just way for this to be done. Again compare this situation with the current 'market competition' ethos that is being pushed vigorously by the economically powerful countries.

Other comparisons with the real world can be drawn. However, end with the insight that if each of the participants only focused (as they did) on improving their economic situation (fulfilling their basic needs), as most development workers do, **without** analyzing the **power** relationships that run the entire game (entire societal structure), there is no hope of significantly changing the situation of the marginalized, although of course some groups will do better than others. Therefore, such an analysis of who holds the power, and how they have made the rules/structures to safeguard their own power is crucial if one must work from a rights-based approach – for in such an approach we need to tackle the root causes of why people are poor, not just the symptoms of their poverty.

Appendix 4

Year/CIS #	CIS#1	CIS#2	CIS#3	CIS#4	CIS#5
2006 (23 week Diploma Program: three mandatory, two elective co-operative inquiries)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintaining & recruiting in member-based organizations • Sustainability and ownership of community-based organizations • Recruiting & maintaining a volunteer base • Human rights • Globalization (1 & 2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth employment • Fundraising & proposal writing • Communications & public relations • Mobilization of the marginalized • Gender & development • Income generating activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NGOs & politics • Spirituality & development • Youth development & HIV/AIDS • Human resources & development • Migration & development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental sustainability • Good governance • Transformation for social change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feminization of poverty • Exit strategies
2007 (23 week Diploma Program: three mandatory co-operative inquiries)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustainable agriculture • Gender & development • Volunteerism • Leadership • Participatory processes • Mobilizing resources • Youth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth engagement • Sustainable development (1 & 2) • Youth and globalization • Domestic violence • Alternative communication • Rights-based approach • Restrictive media laws 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capacity building • Global warming • Spirituality for transformative learning • Promoting sustainable small micro-enterprises • Religion & social justice • HIV-AIDS 		

Year/CIS #	CIS#1	CIS#2	CIS#3	CIS#4	CIS#5
<p>2008 (23 week Diploma Program: three mandatory co-operative inquiries)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth empowerment • Dalit (caste) discrimination • Women's empowerment (1 & 2) • Land degradation & sustainable environment • Sustainability of community development programs (1 & 2) • Conflict • Forming co-operative movements • Living positively with HIV/AIDS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drug & substance abuse • by men & boys • Promoting girls' education • ICTs & food security • Truth & reconciliation commissions • Responding to violence against Christians • Good governance and best practices in NGOs • Balancing community development initiatives with external aid (1 & 2) • Motivation & creativity in building effective communities • Care & support to people living with HIV/AIDS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role of the private sector in community development • Capacity building of children • Victimization of women and children in conflict situations • Love, romance & sexual harassment • Children at risk: labor & street children (1 & 2) • Globalization & the present financial crisis • Disasters & disaster preparedness (1 & 2) 		

Year/CIS #	CIS#1	CIS#2	CIS#3	CIS#4	CIS#5
<p>2009 (23 week Diploma Program: two mandatory co-operative inquiries)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflict transformation and peace building • Good governance • HIV/AIDS in young people • Women leadership • Poverty reduction: Community-driven livelihood initiatives • Disability and development • Environmental sustainability and development • Using ICT to enhance economic development at the local level • Youth development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Antigonish Movement principles • HIV/AIDS: Gender issues in care and support • ABCD (1 & 2) • Young people's issues/perspectives on community development • Gender development issues • Adult education as a tool for social change • Economic impact of globalization on developing countries • Spirituality and community development 			

Year/CIS #	CIS#1	CIS#2	CIS#3	CIS#4	CIS#5
<p>2010 (19 week Diploma Program: one mandatory, one elective co-operative inquiry)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Socio-religious harmony • NGOs, government & community development (1 & 2) • How does gender affect economic, social & political development in society? • Climate change & global warming (1 & 2) • Who benefits from international volunteers & staff from developed to least developed countries? • Public policy & globalization • Women's liberation vs the family unit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ABCD & health • Alternative options for small-scale farmers • Restorative justice • Rights-based approaches (1 & 2) • Domestic violence (1 & 2) • Good governance 			

Year/CIS #	CIS#1	CIS#2	CIS#3	CIS#4	CIS#5
<p>2011 (19 week Diploma Program: one mandatory, one elective co-operative inquiry)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental justice & the effects of dumping • Reducing gender discrimination to attain food security • Women in leadership • Role of microfinance in rural Africa • Asian development in an era of global trade • Including LGBTQ in community development work • Using analytical tools effectively for development • Climate change & community development • Climate change drivers, impact & response 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can local communities benefit from companies working in their area? • How can we respond to social, economic & political challenges of youth? • Effects of climate change on development – adaptations & mitigation 			

Year/CIS #	CIS#1	CIS#2	CIS#3	CIS#4	CIS#5
2012 (19 week Diploma Program: one mandatory co-operative inquiry)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership & corruption • Aid dependency in Africa • HIV/AIDS & children • Indigenous knowledge, community participation & development • Spirituality & development • Role of universities in community development • Labour migration and the economy 				
2013 (19 week Diploma Program: one mandatory co-operative inquiry)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child marriage & reproductive health • From dependency to asset-based community development • Impact of external aid • Poor women in urban areas • Microfinance for the poor • Formation & sustainability of community groups • -Globalization 				

<p>2014 (20 week Diploma Program: two mandatory co-operative inquiries)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education for youth, children & adults • Gender • Adult education & economic development & leadership • Ending corruption, embezzlement & disparities between rich & poor • Citizen participation in government • Good governance • Climate change and economic development • Poverty reduction in developing countries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civil society: walking the talk • How to eradicate defilement, child marriages & single motherhood • Women's rights in the informal sector • Inclusion of differently abled people • Love & marriage (1 & 2) • How can we ensure development without destroying nature? • Practical political science to ensure accountability 			
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Note: If there was great interest in a particular topic, two groups were formed as indicated above in brackets.

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