

# People's Educational Spaces: Antigonish and Highlander as institutional cases supporting learning in social movements

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**Abstract:** Using the concept of people's educational spaces, this paper explores aspects of how learning for democratic participation was developed in two institutional contexts, St. Francis Xavier University's Extension Department and the Highlander Research and Education Center. Attention is paid to the physical and conceptual spaces of these programs, the ways people's knowledge were gathered and valued, as well as the tensions evident in these contexts.

Civic participation and activism are garnering considerable discussion in light of political and social mobilizations such as the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street and Quebec's own Maple Spring. As dynamic as these events appear in the media, long term active citizen participation is a more complex process of learning and action. Lewin (1948) observed that democracy must be "learned anew" each generation. So, it seems, *how* people learn democracy must also in itself be learned anew. Websites of civil society organizations promoting democratic engagement offer a plethora of how-to manuals, yet the ways that organizations work with people who come together to learn, understand and organize collectively in these contexts are underrepresented in the literature. What can we learn today of past education programs and models in this context?

This study revisits two well known education programs linked to social movements, using an analysis combining political and social theory concepts of "real utopias" (Wright, 2010), "free spaces" for democratic change (Evans & Boyte, 1993; Polletta, 1999), integrated with theories of community learning for social action (Foley, 2001; Holst, 2009; Tett, 2010). St. Francis Xavier University's (St.FX) Extension Department nurtured the Antigonish Movement—a social mobilization program in eastern Canada emerging in the 1930s. The Highlander Folk School (now the Highlander Research and Education Center) supported the civil rights movement in the United States. The lessons and tensions of how these institutions created "free educational spaces" in support of social justice are explored using archival material and writings of those involved in the programs.

## Theoretical Framework

In the face of the fragmenting pressure of capitalist and bureaucratic models, Evans and Boyte (1992) examine the physical and social settings that generate the communal strength required to resist these pressures to create "free spaces" for participation. Polletta (1999) identifies three organizational forms: transmovement (outsiders who assist communities, citing Highlander, see also Morris, 1984); indigenous (self-mobilizing); and prefigurative (organizations emerging from movements). Though, these distinctions are not as clear cut as they may appear. Wright's (2010) theory of "emancipatory social transformation" towards "real utopias" informs this analysis as

the leaders of both the St.FX Extension Department and Highlander proclaimed emancipatory goals of an equitable society that embraced dreams that were well beyond the immediate tasks of more practical aspects of their respective programs. The tension between dreams and practice Wright describes helps work through the tensions of such emancipatory ideals and the practical daily work of these movements and education programs, and who are the key participants. Both the Antigonish Movement and Highlander programs strove for the sustainability of their rural contexts, and saw ignorance at the root of oppression. The educational spaces were reinforced by a rural utopian vision for transformation.

Holst's (2009) work on "radical training" also explores this tension of theory and practice, noting that despite the association of training with mechanistic models, it has an important role to play in supporting the practical activities required for social action. Tett (2011) notes, "Education's role is to make a space for collective production of knowledge (p.51)." This understanding is important for community educators who confront a narrowed policy environment dictating economic human resource priorities. A recurring impediment that activist organizations acknowledge is the capacity to document and preserve their work and challenge hegemonic discourses. "We need to interrogate the silences, omissions, and misrepresentations that may exist in dominant NGO and scholarly accounts of campaigns and mobilizations (Choudry & Kapoor, 2010, p.7). People's educational spaces can play a key role in this important documentation work.

### **Models for Learning and Action**

The intent here is not to retell stories that are recounted in detail elsewhere (see A. Horton, 1989; Coady, 1939). Instead, the focus is on how the educators and participants learned and acted within their respective institutional settings. Following a brief description of each institution in the context of its guiding "real utopian" vision, the work of the educators and participants is explored through two key themes: the created educational space and the support to create people's knowledge. The vision draws people to movements and the institutions connected to them, but the spaces and practices are what are needed to generate new knowledge in social action.

#### *The Highlander Idea*

The Highlander Folk School was led by Myles Horton and others to support social and political education for marginalized people in the southern US. Drawing inspiration from the Danish folk schools, the Highlander founders created an independent school in the 1930s, free from external rules and control. This rural retreat built on donated land in Tennessee provided a place for experimentation in education programs to support people who would lead social change (Thayer-Bacon, 2004). Following early mixed results with labour education, the program matured as it tackled the racism and segregation that thwarted sustainable change. By the 1950s Highlander was synonymous with civil rights education. This "movement halfway house" provided "social change resources such as skilled activists, tactical knowledge, media contacts, workshops, knowledge of past movements, and a vision of a future society" (Morris, 1984, p. 140). The Highlander programs combined residential workshops with an "after process" (Adams, 1975) of outreach to provide additional skills for social activists working in their communities. Adams (1972) also describes the specifics of organization being left "deliberately vague" to allow for flexibility to suit the participants. The residential experience at the Highlander school in its

isolated, rural location was key, creating a non-hierarchical space for people to build trust through the daily acts of communal life to learn and act democratically and solve problems together (Adams, 1972). Descriptions of Highlander regularly emphasize the rustic rural setting of this educational space that embodies “plain living and high thinking” (Cobb, 1961). The sharing of cultural knowledge through folk songs and stories were also emphasized. In later years, Highlander returned to the ongoing oppressive conditions facing surrounding Appalachian communities. McDermott (2008) notes in particular the empowerment experienced by women participants who, through workshops and research developed their “voice” to overcome their own silencing backgrounds of illiteracy and poverty.

One specific space of Highlander, the library, is often mentioned though is not extensively studied in the context of the institution's programs overall. Loveland (1999) fills a few gaps by recounting the stories of the early librarians who were also activist educators. Hilda Hulbert developed a “radical working class consciousness” at Highlander and, “had come to see information exchange as the means by which the southern worker connected with an international labor movement” (p. 184). Mary Lawrance and Harry Lasker who were later librarians at Highlander worked with the “Traveling Library Program” gave them valuable local consciousness, “Getting to know the people where they lived was essential to work at Highlander” (p. 186). In the 1970s, the library served as a hub for for the growing participatory action research program (Lewis, 2001; Loveland, 1999). “Highlander and similar organizations have an important role to play in systematizing and giving validity to peoples' knowledge” (Lewis, 2001, p. 361). The process of participatory research not only validated the people's own knowledge and oral history, it made them more critical of expert knowledge, and empowered them to speak up. In recent years, the issue of the institution's archival collections are of concern to ensure people's stories are preserved (Loveland, 1999; Susan Williams, personal correspondence).

### *The Antigonish Way*

Moses Coady, first director of the Extension Department at St.FX, was critical of existing education processes that nurtured the brightest minds for advancement and careers away while leaving the mass of the rural population undereducated and robbed of their future leaders. The response was to envision an adult education program that would harness the power of groups to break the “dictatorship of big business and finance...By intelligent individual and group action, the masses can repossess the earth” (Coady, 1939, p. 138). Traditional campus-based programs were not successful, so the Extension Department fieldworkers implemented a community-based learning model. Study clubs were hoped to “light little fires” in the communities (MacInnes, 1978). The ability of these study clubs to form associations like co-operatives and credit unions, were facilitated by the technical assistance provided by Extension, but it was the clear objective that these be community-led initiatives. This diffuse educational space provided reach to the isolated rural areas, with an institutional base from which to provide the technical and material support, and to gather and promote the ideas generated from these many little initiatives. The programs spread to industrial Cape Breton as well to support the mine workers, though the literature of the day still tended to evoke the images of fishing villages and family farms. The isolation experienced in these areas contributed to the success of the study clubs. Fieldworkers Sisters Marie Michael MacKinnon and Irene Doyle emphasized the importance of the study clubs for both generating local leadership and for resolving problems and conflicts (MacKinnon

& Doyle, 1990). Foley (2001) similarly describes the neighbourhood houses he studied in Australia as sites of struggles “and the struggles themselves as providing opportunities for learning” (p.77).

From the outset, the Antigonish program developed methods we would now recognize as action research. Moses Coady quipped that groups had to “fail at least twice before they will know they can do it” (MacKinnon & Doyle, 1990). This method is described by Dodaro and Pluta (2012) as “problem-analysis-vision-experiment-theory” as fieldworkers collaborated with people in the communities to develop programs that would work.

The study clubs eventually gave way to other educational programs by the Extension Department, which to this day are still conducted regionally in collaboration with community groups to address local needs. The Coady International Institute, created to respond to international demand for the Antigonish model, developed both a residential program for development workers from the global south, complemented with overseas research and training programs. The reports from these workshops through the 1970s-80s show recurring themes that integrate the study and local application of the principles of the Antigonish Movement to an analysis of the contemporary issues in the context of the workshop setting. Integrated with this is contemporary development theory and methods of Freirean popular education. These workshops were often conducted in partnership with organizations with Coady graduates. For example Le Morvan (1987) records the historical ties of the partnership with the Confederacion Mexicana de Cajas Populares representing 180 credit unions, a movement which traces its origins to the establishment of the first credit union in 1951 by two priests who had come to St. FX to learn about the Antigonish Movement in 1949 and 1950. The confederation “maintains a strong emphasis on member education and solidarity” (LeMorvan, 1987, p. 1).

The Extension Department too had a library to support its work. Topshee (1940) claimed, “Perhaps the library should be the actual head and center of all or most of a community’s informal adult education activities” (p.6). The Extension Department acquired Carnegie funds “to the development of the library in relation to the demands of the adult education program” (Lester, 1936) enabling the small library in Antigonish to be supplemented with satellite branches throughout the region during the study club years. The library adjusted its services as the programs evolved. Like Highlander's library during these decades, the Extension library provided a combination of practical resources and literature of broader interests. The librarian Sr. Marie Michael observed the thick economics textbooks returning unread, which reinforced the need to adapt materials to meet the interest and reading level of those who were using them. The scripts of her radio programs also demonstrated this balance of adaptation to local practical needs, with the vision of offering wider vistas through literature (Irving and Adams, 2012). Like the Highlander librarians, Sr. Marie Michael was also an active fieldworker and worked with hundreds of women's study clubs.

Key to the work of the Extension Department was the sharing of information and innovations through various means, including regional meetings, *The Maritime Co-operator* newspaper (Topshee, 1940), and the annual Rural and Industrial Conferences. Promoting people's knowledge was important as Boyle (in MacInnes, 1978) noted in particular the leadership roles of the “humble” farmers and fisherfolk who were active participants and speakers at the Rural

and Industrial Conferences. Though, this was not entirely inclusive as women were typically relegated to the women's section of the conference. When a woman, Nora Bateson, was invited to speak to the entire conference, it was a notable exception (Irving and Adams, 2012).

### **Themes and Tensions**

This study identifies a number of shared themes as well as tensions involved in creating and supporting the educational space that addressed their visions. The real utopias remind us to bring to light the the human failings and prejudices that we deal with in daily life.

#### *Making use of educational spaces*

Both programs developed methods that would not be named in the emancipatory literature until decades later. Methods resembling popular education were successful because they did enact the understanding and respect the staff had for the local people. Rather than imposing cookie cutter models, the programs honoured and integrated local knowledge and the settings to adapt the learning spaces that were best suited to organizing in their areas. When times changed, the educational spaces adapted too.

#### *People's knowledge*

The literature on adult education and social justice places people's knowledge and experience at the centre of learning. These programs evolved methods over the years to put this belief into practice in a variety of ways that would later be identified as action research. However, in the literature the results of these initiatives have not been well documented in recent decades. The Coady Institute's research has until recently been primarily used in testing and strengthening its own programming. It is now placing more emphasis on documenting the action learning and research for wider audiences.

#### *Tensions between practical and utopian*

To embrace the “tension between dreams and practice” Wright (2010) calls for “utopian destinations that have accessible waystations, utopian designs of institutions that can inform our practical tasks of navigating a world of imperfect conditions for social change” (p.6). Both Highlander and Antigonish live the mixed blessing as touchstones of adult education for social justice in North America. Like many historical phenomena, these stories are also often incomplete, simplified, or misrepresented. The stories of the blossoming of co-operatives in Nova Scotia and of citizenship schools in the southern United States have threatened to lock our institutions in a past that overshadows the work we do now. It is notable that most writings about Highlander's work since the civil rights movement are by Highlander staff, while other adult educators continue to describe it in historical terms. McDermott (2007) claims that while the historical “myth” can be inspiring, it can also hide the other important empowerment work that has been achieved. There is also the tension of an institution supporting a movement becoming identified *as* that movement, which beyond causing confusion, poses the risk of undermining the ownership of the movement by the people themselves.

#### *Tensions of participation, exclusion and memory*

McDermott (2007) who has researched the internal work of Highlander women notes, “It is important that our research does not replicate oppression by leaving out power and positionality in our analyses” (p.407). Throughout the documented history of the Antigonish Movement,

women's participation has been noted in passing with admiration, though the details of their stories have remained secondary to the dominant narrative of Moses Coady. While Sr. Marie Michael and Sr Irene Doyle (1990) were integral to the St.FX Extension Department in the 1930s, tensions grew as women were denied full participation in co-operatives and the women's program faced chronic underfunding. Coady (1939) optimistically described women's roles this way: "The guilds aim at spreading cooperative education among the members of the store, arousing the women to greater interest in community affairs and...promoting a finer spirit of loyalty among the women members" (p.61). Sr. Irene Doyle chafed at the assumption that women's guilds were adequate. This was not a sufficient space for women's participation, and certainly not equal to the spaces open to men. The Extension Department also faced criticism for not working more closely with African Nova Scotian and aboriginal communities, though by the 1960s, they had active programs.

### Concluding Comments

"Peoples' educational spaces" can play a role in building social movements. The institutions that survive today from these two traditions continue to support learning for social justice. The lessons of Highlander in the created safe space for reflection and mobilization, and of the Antigonish Movement in bridging the local and regional arenas, demonstrate that these educational spaces can take different forms in response to the needs and aspirations of the participants. There is a heavy responsibility to document and archive the work, to preserve the historical record of social activism—a challenging task for those with few resources and pressing priorities of activist work. Institutions working with social activists also have a role in the documentation and other activities that can support the learning and research of people engaged in social action. What cannot be forgotten is that the ideas and organizations have to be community-led.

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