

Book Review

LEARNING THROUGH COMMUNITY: EXPLORING PARTICIPATORY PRACTICES

Kathryn Church, Nina Bascia, Eric Shragge, Editors.
Springer, Toronto, 2008, 216 pages.

During the past years, no Canadian adult education research group has been more productive than the group based at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto. New Approaches to Lifelong Learning (NALL), The Changing Nature of Work and Lifelong Learning (WALL), and the Centre for the Study of Education and Work at OISE, led by David Livingstone with able support from D'Arcy Martin and a score of thoughtful scholar-activists, have given us many papers, books, surveys, Web pages, symposia, and conferences with a particular focus on adult education and work and the ever-evolving understanding of informal adult learning.

The collection of papers assembled by Kathryn Church, Nina Bascia, and Eric Shragge is the latest of the extremely useful reflections. *Learning through Community* emerged from what the editors call the periphery of the NALL project. Although the work began 10 years ago, I would suggest that the wait has been worthwhile. The delay in coming to print is, according to the editors, due to the diversity of contributors and the vagaries of academic publishing in the early 21st century. The editors themselves bring a wonderfully diverse set of experiences as scholar-activists. Kathryn is a pioneering social scientist who honed her skills in community-based participatory research in community-led disability rights advocacy groups in Toronto. She is now based at Ryerson University in the School of Disability Studies. Nina is one of the best-known scholars in North America in the field of teachers, teaching, and their organizations. She has chaired the Theory and Policy Studies Group at OISE at the University of Toronto. Eric is an internationally recognized leader of both theory and practice in community economic development and currently is director of the Graduate Diploma in Community Economic Development in the School of Community and Public Affairs at Concordia University.

The book is a collection of Canadian case studies about informal learning—what it looks like and how it happens in different socio-cultural, political, and organizational settings. The book gives us an in-depth look at the complexities of informal learning and the challenges that it presents in doing research and theoretical elaboration. The editors offer a basic and extremely helpful early definition. Informal learning is any process, they suggest, that occurs outside the context of school programs or continuing education courses. And of course they immediately move to complicate their own definition by drawing readers' attention to a full discussion of the many different ways that informal learning can be understood, drawing on some of the most obvious literature and recent experiences. The editors understand the collection to make a contribution primarily to understanding informal learning in the context of changing socio-economic contexts, its focus on collective learning, and its focus on learning arising from oppositional action.

For those interested in how complex it is to work collaboratively over a number of years on themes of common interest, the book's several introductory chapters are unusually transparent. This is a group of editors and authors who have refused to cover over the complexities of collective academic publishing by producing a seemingly grand narrative-style introduction and a well-behaved list of chapter titles all standing up to be seen and accounted for. Students and other scholars will recognize, if not enjoy, the descriptions of the collaborative process and the frustrations and ultimate victory in getting this particular set of papers finally between two covers!

If you take a look at the diversity of authors and contexts for their writing, it will be easy to see why this collection is so very interesting, but also why it has been so very difficult to tie up in a tidy analytic package. The core of the book comprises case studies from what the editors say are the margins of informal learning—also the margins, they report, of the NALL research network. And what a range it is. Shahrzad Mojab and Susan McDonald write of learning and violence in the lives of immigrant women who have been involved in or come from revolutionary movements in the Middle East and elsewhere. They examine the complex interactions of gender, race, patriarchy, imperialism, and the impact of war through a learning lens. Perhaps they are the first persons ever to do so. Diane Meaghan looks at teaching safer sex among Canadian sex workers. Her work also is the first, as far as this reviewer is aware, that looks at the learning dimensions of sex trade working contexts. Daniel Schugurensky and John P. Myers take on a totally different scene looking at informal learning amongst seniors and their struggles with the Toronto Task Force of Healthy City Toronto. Kathryn Church, Eric Schragge, Jean-Marc Fontan, and Roxana Ng look at the exceedingly diverse groups of people who are not in the workforce. These excluded women and men most assuredly learn for survival in collective ways as they become experts in the understanding of their own situations. Mary Stratton and Edward Jackson of Ottawa take a very helpful look at the experiences of women practitioners in the community economic development sector. This again is one of the first pieces that this reviewer has seen from a gender perspective on work in this sector, which seems most often to be framed from a false notion of gender neutrality. Kari Dehli and Doreen Fumia look at teachers as activists and players in the contemporary struggles for democratic education that have so bedevilled our times. Nina Bascia also looks at teachers with a case study from the Alberta Teachers' Association. Her look has a focus on the role of learning in the internal workings of the association. Finally, Marilyn Laiken, Karen Edge, Stephen Friedman, and Karima West take a look at the juxtaposition of the discourses of informal learning and organizational learning in what they call the post-industrial workplace.

I think that this is a most timely and important collection. It comes at a time when there is renewed interest in community-university research partnerships and a time when community outreach, community engagement, and engaged scholarship have found their way into the offices of the senior administrators of the granting councils and many of our universities. It also comes at a time when the results of the dismantling of social networks and the limits of provincial and national policies focusing on helping the rich get richer is becoming clear to large numbers of people. A book that focuses, therefore, on the learning dimensions of life in these diverse locations is welcome indeed. Should I have an opportunity to teach a foundational course in adult education anytime soon, I will use this book.

In reading over the manuscript I was, however, somewhat troubled by the constant positioning by the authors as marginal. They claim marginality for the original research project's central themes; marginality for themselves as somehow tilling soil beyond the fences of more recognized academic fields; and marginality for those people with whom they are variously allied in struggles of various kinds. I certainly understand the feelings associated with this kind of position. There are many who would locate my own work as marginal in the same ways. I think, however, that if one looks not at the socio-economic marginalization of each of these groups taken in isolation but at the collective that they represent, they may be understood as being at the centre of transformative learning, social change, resistance, survival, and so forth. Add up the numbers yourselves: non-white women who have experienced violence and immigration; sex workers (and their clients); senior activists for health; the unemployed; local economic development practitioners; teachers; workers in white-collar public or private organizations. Taken collectively these are not marginal populations in spite of their class or identity locations. But equally important, the authors, the researchers, are most certainly not marginal. They are at the heart of understanding the learning dimensions of citizenship, social movements, survival, and celebration. Their work is fundamentally central to society today and they should seize this territory. To understand one's scholarly location in another way feels to this reviewer as accepting the distorted lens of the powerful who constantly project the views of the rich, the male, the straight, and the white.

My final remarks concern the opportunity for enlarged dialogue. If one goes back to Alfred Fitzpatrick, the founder of Frontier College, or Raymond Williams, whose work is so well-represented in the collection edited by John McIlroy and Sallie Westwood, *Border Country*, or more recently Griff Foley, who writes about learning and social action in Australia and elsewhere, or Darlene Clover, whose work in areas such as environmental action, women, and the arts, or even to my own work on social movement learning, there is a broader set of discourses within which this work is a wonderful example. I for one would have loved to have seen some reference to the longer historic traditions of this kind of work in Canada and elsewhere. Having said all that, it was a privilege for me to have the opportunity to read this book and I most certainly commend it to others.

Budd L Hall

Office of Community-Based Research, University of Victoria