

# Community-University Partnerships: Community Engagement for Transformative Learning

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## ABSTRACT

Recently, various scholars have remarked that university continuing education (UCE) is moving away from one of its original core foci, that of social justice. In this article, the possible causes of this are discussed, including current political environments, the role of universities and academics in perpetuating or disrupting the status quo, and increased reliance on cost recovery and for-profit programming. Community-based participatory research as a feasible strategy for promoting UCE's role in social justice is also presented. An example of UCE that was developed in response to existing social inequities and driven by discussions with the community is offered to demonstrate that critical voices can have an impact and that institutions of higher education can be collaborative and foster networks of

## RÉSUMÉ

Récemment, plusieurs érudites ont remarqué que l'éducation permanente universitaire se distancie d'une de ses cibles d'attention de base, celle de la justice sociale. Dans cet article, l'auteur propose des causes possibles pour cette distanciation, y compris les environnements politiques actuels, le rôle des universités et des académiques dans la perpétuation ou la perturbation du statu quo, ainsi que la confiance accrue sur la programmation de recouvrement des coûts et à profits. Aussi présente-t-elle comment la recherche communautaire participative est une bonne stratégie pour promouvoir le rôle de l'éducation permanente universitaire en justice sociale. Miller offre un exemple d'éducation permanente universitaire qui fut développé en réponse aux injustices sociales existantes et qui fut mené par des discussions

relationships for learning. Finally, key points for the successful development of a UCE program that responds to critical voices and returns to social justice are shared.

avec la communauté afin de démontrer que des opinions données peuvent avoir un impact, et que les institutions d'éducation supérieure peuvent être collaboratives et peuvent favoriser la mise sur pied de réseaux de relations pour l'apprentissage. Finalement, l'auteur partage des points-clés pour développer avec succès un programme d'éducation permanente universitaire répondant aux opinions données et retournant à la justice sociale.

## INTRODUCTION

According to some recent literature, there is a trend toward economically driven programming and the withdrawal of government funding and support for university continuing education (UCE) in Canada (Haughey, 2006; McLean, 2007). This is said to be happening despite increased expectations for UCE to provide "a range of opportunities for lifelong learners" (Nesbit, Dunlop, & Gibson, 2007, p. 36) and to show a commitment to educational programming for social justice. In this article, I suggest that the use of a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach is one strategy that may help to temper or possibly reverse this trend. The goal of CBPR, an approach often taken in research with marginalized communities, is to promote social change by bringing together human and fiscal resources for a common cause.

Some current CBPR programs in UCE are reviewed, and an evolving UCE program that focuses on CBPR and health promotion with Indigenous populations is used to present strategies for returning to transformative learning with social justice outcomes.

## THE CHANGING FACE OF UNIVERSITY CONTINUING EDUCATION

Denis Haughey has clearly articulated the sense of malaise that many adult educators are feeling about current trends in adult education. He has provided much food for thought on university extension/continuing education in two book chapters: "From Passion to Passivity: The Decline of University Extension for Social Change" (1998) and "Not Waving but Drowning: Canadian University Extension for Social Change Revisited" (2006). In his 1998 chapter, Haughey cited the declining role of UCE as an agent for democratic social change. In order to demonstrate the changing face of adult education, he specified landmark programs that captured the "passion, creativity, and dedication" (p. 200) of adult educators from the 1930s to the 1970s and exemplified learning opportunities at Canadian universities whose aim was to develop "an informed and involved public voice" (p. 200). Haughey went on to propose some possible causes for the decline in the "dispassionate examination of social issues of the day" (p. 204) and to describe the impact of this decline on subsequent adult education programs and services. The possible causes included: the university itself, in particular, its increasingly conservative nature; political inaction, seen in the academic body's lack of desire or ability to rally external political support or to withstand political pressures to reflect the status quo (perhaps demoralized by constant reorganization and financial downsizing); the increased emphasis on adult education for professional development (as demonstrated by cost-recovery programming); and a loss of social commitment. Add to these, the fact that human and fiscal resources must be committed to new sites of practice and networks with partners external to the university. (Selman [2005] described the current phase or movement in UCE, citing many of the same qualities: cost-recovery programs; the elimination of "subsidized" programs; vocationally oriented programs and an increased focus on credentialism; and various means of capturing "markets.") Haughey also called on adult educators to overcome intellectual passivity or reluctance to be morally committed to social change, adding that to be so committed required reflective practice, personal intellectual renewal, and a new theory upon which to build emancipatory education. In this final section of his chapter, Haughey suggested that academics in adult education read theorists such as Gramsci, Giroux, and Friere, whose work was inspired by the need for social change.

In his 2006 book chapter, Haughey revisited his critique of UCE, concluding that the trend he noted in 1998 had, for the most part, taken hold, as the rise of neo-liberal governments and subsequent fiscal and ideological pressures had "infiltrated extension operations and considerably blunted the critical social approaches with which we were previously comfortable

and more adept” (p. 300). He drew upon comments by Bagnall (2000, cited in Haughey, 2006) and others who support his belief that decisions regarding adult education programming and delivery are made on the basis of cost recovery and economic benefit as opposed to social change or social action. Bagnall had written that “contemporary educational change is largely and ultimately driven, framed and determined by considerations of cost and benefit measured through the economy” (p. 299), while Nesbit et al. (2007) stated that “those lifelong learning opportunities that do exist in institutions of higher education appear to focus on enhancing employment and career opportunities over citizenship development” (p. 46). Additionally, Scott McLean’s (2007) review of current continuing adult education programming in Canada provided evidence for the growing influence of this trend. In his review of continuing education websites, McLean found that “the primary role claimed by CAUCE [Canadian Association of University Continuing Education] members for their work is to address people’s need for professional development and personal growth” (p. 72).

Despite the evidence of this growing trend in continuing adult education, Plumb and Welton (cited in Haughey, 2006) posited that there continues to be pressure from critical voices—feminist, ecological, and Aboriginal, among others—for educational programs that reflect transformative and critical inquiry. To this end, Nesbit et al. (2007) suggested that institutions of higher education

reposition themselves as “learning organizations” (Faris, 2003; Tinto, 1997). Such an approach would go some way toward *reasserting the citizenship aspects* of lifelong learning discussed earlier and requiring institutions of higher education to recognize and develop their capacity as sources of learning, resources, and partnerships. In addition to providing a range of educational opportunities, institutions of higher education might *collaborate in, and foster, networks of relationships with local groups and communities to generate debate and promote learning as a guiding principle to organizational and community change.* (p. 48, italics added)

The following description of community-based participatory research from Cram and Morrison (2005), as both an approach for repositioning institutions of higher education and a program of study, demonstrates that critical voices can impact educational programs and that institutions of higher education can be collaborative in nature and foster networks of relationships for learning that are motivated by the need for social (organizational and community) change.

### ***Community-Based Participatory Research: An Approach to UCE Program Development***

Cram and Morrison (2005) provided a conceptualization of social justice that is useful for exploring the evolving development of community-based participatory research (CBPR) for use in program development. As these authors asserted, "It can be argued that we will find evidence for social justice both in the *processes* by which we plan educational programs and facilitate learning and in the *products* we provide as educational programs" (p. 32). In other words, what we believe to be "just" is reflected not only in the programs we offer but also in the processes we use to identify educational needs and to develop and deliver programs. Wilson and Cervero (2001, cited in Cram & Morrison, 2005) wrote that "strategic educational practice means political action that forthrightly attempts to alter who benefits in such struggles [for knowledge and power] by seeking to redistribute benefits to those who should" (p. 33). Education for social justice or social change, then, is defined as educational processes and products that disrupt the status quo in order to reduce inequities.

CBPR is a useful approach to the development of programming that is aimed at social justice, as described by Cram and Morrison (2005). It is a collaborative approach that involves a diversity of individuals and groups (e.g., academic researchers, professionals, service providers, and community members) in all stages of the research process. All partners share ownership, control, influence, and decision making and contribute their expertise according to each individual's knowledge and skills (Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998).

## **COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH IN UCE PROGRAMS**

The growing popularity and recognition of CBPR as a viable and credible research approach is evident in recent requests for proposals from major Canadian funding agencies (Alberta Centre for Child, Family & Community Research, 2008; Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2008a, 2008 b; Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2008). A review of recent workshops and conferences that include a CBPR presentation or focus is another testament to its growing popularity.

This increased expectation that academics will engage with community partners in CBPR, particularly in research that addresses health inequities, requires careful consideration of the potential inequities of such partnerships. In the absence of appropriate programs providing training in how to develop community/academic partnerships, building equitable relationships

for research that is relevant and accessible to community partners will be challenging, at best. Therefore, CBPR training, developed and delivered with members of the learning community, is suggested as one possible strategy to rejuvenate the passion for and commitment to university continuing education that supports social justice.

### *What Makes CBPR Training Transformative Learning?*

In order to be truly collaborative, CBPR must encourage community participation throughout the research process and assume a shared understanding of not only the roles and responsibilities of each research team member but also research ethics, protocols, and processes. The overall goal of CBPR is to honour community members' knowledge and understanding of their own strengths and challenges and their ability to develop research questions to address these challenges for the purpose of improving health outcomes and building community capacity (Buchanan, Miller, & Wallerstein, 2007).

One obstacle to realizing the core value of community participation is the absence of training for community-based partners. In its absence, we 1) reinforce inequitable distributions of power, 2) compromise the comfort and confidence of community partners to fulfill their roles as researchers and health promoters, and 3) jeopardize the validity and relevance of the work being done. Being aware and critical of these persistent inequities, I was intrigued by McLean's (2007) comment on the role of universities in the reproduction of inequality and perhaps, unintentionally, the legitimization of inequities (p. 79). Is the near absence of CBPR training for non-academic audiences one example of the systematic perpetuation of inequities? If so, does an Indigenous-specific CBPR program present an opportunity to develop UCE that is motivated by social justice and the desire to promote social change? I propose that, with access to CBPR education programs, Indigenous communities (often marginal to academic institutions and, at times, to mainstream culture/values/beliefs) have greater potential to shape and lead social change.

## **EXPLORING CURRENT CBPR PROGRAMS IN UCE**

As a graduate student, my first teaching experiences in UCE took me to communities (First Nations and immigrant) traditionally under served by mainstream educational institutions. The work of theorists of education for social change began to resonate with me as I worked with individuals and communities that had been historically marginalized by the traditional university environment. As Selman (2005) noted:

People from some communities get little access to university resources, whereas people from others are overrepresented. Even if admitted to university, people from some communities find it difficult to take

advantage of the opportunity. This is perhaps most obvious in Canada in the case of Aboriginal students . . . (p. 25)

Giroux (2007) proposed that we open spaces for dialogue and allow public time, measured by “the opportunity for individuals and groups to share resources, debate, think otherwise, and consider the task of having a positive, long-term impact on the world” (p. 196). Since accepting an academic appointment, I have been exploring ways to increase access for historically marginalized (non-traditional) learners to the formal learning environment of the university. The examination of CBPR for non-traditional learners that follows confirmed the need for what Giroux (2007) referred to as “public time” in the creation of CBPR education.

“One of the roles that continuing education can play is to develop programs that provide an alternative entry point for those who did not enter university programs through the main door, as it were, but still want to access further education” (Selman, 2005, p. 25). In order to explore CBPR training in light of its potential to increase access to transformative learning for social justice, a review of all CBPR training currently available in UCE *outside* of traditional, undergraduate, and graduate credit is presented. The information on existing educational programming is derived from three main sources: documents accessed via the Internet; online and hard copies of community college calendars; and email and telephone communications with persons knowledgeable in areas of community-based research and education. Two primary terms were used for Internet searches: community-based participatory research (CBPR) and community-based research (CBR). Both terms, when accompanied by one or more of the qualifiers—training/education/resources—produced very similar search results.

Comprehensive programs offering learners a structured opportunity to acquire CBPR-related skills that are relevant and immediately applicable in a wide variety of settings are few in number. Often, they are intended for specific populations of learners and communities and, as such, are limited in scope. For example, according to the website of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Center for American Indian Health Training and Scholarship Program, it has, for several years, offered a comprehensive training program that

. . . aims to provide premiere training opportunities for American Indians in public health and allied health professions in order to help tribes develop local expertise in building appropriate health systems, health policy, culturally appropriate biomedical and behavioral health research, and public health interventions to address priority concerns. (n.p.)

Learners range from tribal health leaders to individuals with little or no formal health-related training. Funding is available to American Indian applicants in order to offset most of the expenses. Courses are offered as institutes in January and July of each year and include: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Understanding the Health of Native Americans; Using Mass Media for Health Promotion in Native Communities; Collecting, Analyzing, and Using Public Health Data in Native American Communities; Introduction to American Indian Health Research Ethics; Introduction to Quantitative and Qualitative Research Methods; Introduction to Data Management Using American Indian Health Data; Mental Health Care and Delivery in Native American Communities.

The website of the University of Colorado Denver, American Indian and Alaska Native Programs notes that the Native Telehealth Outreach and Technical Assistance Program (NTOTAP), though not specific to CBPR, aims to enhance and facilitate communities' capacities to engage in CBPR (and in health-promotion and health-education activities) by teaching technical knowledge, skills, and expertise to lay members of tribal communities and community health professionals. The Community Health Advocate (CHA) Program trains five CHAs at a time, requiring them to travel each month to Denver for instruction and mentoring, over a period of 12 months; the Community Health Professional Program is similar but 18 months in duration.

In Canada, the Alberta Heritage Foundation for Medical Research (AHFMR) offers the Swift and Efficient Application of Research in Community Health (SEARCH) Program, in partnership with regional health authorities (RHAs), universities, and the provincial government. The program, again not specific to CBPR, was established in 1996 and consists of ongoing cycles of two-year research training programs for selected health professionals (usually individuals with several years of front-line health-care experience) employed by RHAs throughout Alberta. The stated goal of the program is ". . . to facilitate expertise in conducting research, and applying findings to meet local needs" (AHFMR, n.d.). It should be noted that although the terms *collaborative*, *applied*, and *evidence-based* are frequently used to describe the program, RHAs select and support participants and pre-select priority topics for projects. Over the two-year training period, participants attend seven residential workshops, each five to seven days in length, which cover specific modules.

Community Information, Empowerment, and Transparency (CIET) is an international organization that specifies *capacity building* as a fundamental component of its research education and training activities worldwide. According to its website, in recent years, CIET, in partnership with Canadian organizations and institutions, has shared its considerable capacity building

and culturally sensitive research training experience and expertise with Aboriginal communities throughout Canada, collaborating on many CBPR projects.

Toronto's Wellesley Institute offers a comprehensive CBPR workshop program that strives to accommodate the interests and research education/training needs of a wide variety of participants. Learners may take single or multiple workshops. Individuals who complete 30 hours of workshop training are granted a Community-Based Research Certificate. Since September 2006, the certificate program has been co-sponsored by the Health Studies Program of University College at the University of Toronto. As noted on its website, the Wellesley Institute undertakes to exert "... a positive influence on health care reform by advancing the social determinants of health." Thus, although issues related to public health, health promotion, and health policy are strongly represented throughout the workshop program, social issues and social determinants of health are primary topics in many workshops. Workshops include: An Introduction to Community-Based Research; Ethical Issues in Community-Based Research; How to Run a Focus Group; How to Do an Interview for Research; How to Develop Effective Client Satisfaction Tools; How to Do a "Literature Review"; Introduction to Concepts and Methods in Community Health Research; Theories in Health Promotion; Theories of Community Development; Writing Effective Letters of Intent; Writing Effective Community-Based Research Proposals; An Introduction to N6 Qualitative Data Management Software; Community-Based Research in Aboriginal Communities; Community-Based Research in Ethnoracial Communities.

The Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth and Family (CUP) at the University of Alberta, in Edmonton, offers CBR education/training initiatives through a series of community workshops/seminars, which are listed on the CUP website. At this point, these workshops/seminars are not accredited.

## **CURRENT CBR TRAINING IN RELATION TO CURRENT UCE TRENDS**

The survey of CBPR education reported above is now used to illustrate and respond to two particular foci of Haughey's (1998, 2006) and McLean's (1996, 2007) reflections: 1) that programming decisions are based on a cost-benefit analysis of economic versus social value, and 2) that this practice may leave UCE units vulnerable to the charge of perpetuating systematic discrimination and inequities and to being displaced by educators who will and do take on the responsibility of providing education for social action.

Of the programs surveyed, two exemplify adult education that is responsive and accessible to adult learners in the community—those offered by the Johns Hopkins Center for American Indian Health in Baltimore, Maryland, and by Toronto's Wellesley Institute. It is interesting to note that these programs have been developed with relatively little or no economic costs to the institutions that offer them. Johns Hopkins receives support and/or provides financial assistance to its students through government funding; the Wellesley Institute was established and is sustained by virtue of a large endowment. Reports by the Wellesley Institute state that the subsidized cost of courses was especially attractive, since, for some learners, the cost of attending workshops is a barrier to access (personal communication with Wellesley director, April 2007). If we use existing CBPR training as an example, it appears that fiscal and human resources are seldom allocated by formal learning institutions for the creation of non-traditional learning opportunities in this field of study. This, in effect, amounts to systematic discrimination against learners whose educational or socio-economic history may have already prevented them from pursuing post-secondary education (McLean, 2007). By discriminating in this way, institutions perpetuate existing inequitable relationships in community-based research. Recognition of this fact is critically important because "if we lose touch with how oppression is being accomplished, we risk losing relevance as social activists and becoming complicit actors in the subjection of ourselves and our learners" (McLean, 1996, p. 15).

It should also be noted that responsive and accessible programs such as those offered by Johns Hopkins or the Wellesley Institute are not offered by continuing education units. Instead, they are offered by institutes or other organizations that have taken on the social-justice aspect of education, as noted by Haughey (2006) in his reflection on Alberta's response to pressing social issues:

I do not see the leading reactions [to pressing issues confronting Albertans] coming from university extension units. Instead, the most incisive and provocative critique is coming either from academics in other sectors of the university or, more frequently, from individuals, organized pressure groups, think tanks . . . (p. 304)

Evidence of the perpetuation of systematic discrimination is also provided by the fact that CBPR is being integrated into undergraduate and graduate programming (Kieren, 2006). Thus, the training of traditional academic learners in CBPR is exceeding that of adult learners working in or with organizations/communities, even though it is the adult learners who will be approached to participate in or lead CBPR initiatives. Most recently, for example, the University of Guelph, in Ontario, launched a Master of Science in Community Development and Extension. The Community-University

Partnership (CUP), which is affiliated with the University of Alberta, is also in the process of developing a graduate certificate program in CBR. As graduate programs, both restrict access to those with undergraduate degrees. Indeed, statements in university visionary documents such as the University of Alberta's (2006) *Dare to Discover* emphasize the priority placed on undergraduate and graduate studies in particular and on relationships with business, industry, and government. To be fair, however, the same document also speaks of the importance of taking pride in contributions from Aboriginal people and other groups, of improving university access for rural, Aboriginal, and non-traditional learners, and of the contribution of discovery and scholarship to public policy. Future developments in research, teaching, and service will provide tangible evidence of the University of Alberta's commitment to these issues.

### *The CBPR Approach and Transformative Learning: Aboriginal Health Promotion*

As noted earlier, Plumb and Welton (cited in Haughey, 2006) posited that there continues to be pressure from critical voices—feminist, ecological, and Aboriginal, among others—for education programs that reflect transformative and critical inquiry. Recent work, funded by the federal government, in response to the need for building the capacity of health promotion leaders in First Nations communities, is making it possible for a research team comprised of colleagues from the University of Alberta and Blue Quills First Nations College to listen and respond to community voices in the development and delivery of a health-promotion program tailored to the needs of practicing health promoters. Health promotion, using CBPR, focuses on building the capacity of individuals and communities for the purpose of social action and community empowerment (Whitehead, 2004). A new program in health promotion with First Nations communities presents an opportunity for UCE to facilitate transformative learning and social justice. The development, delivery and evaluation of an Aboriginal Health Promotion Citation, though still in its infancy, allows for reflection on successful strategies for transformative UCE.

The earlier survey of CBPR programs showed that, in order for such programs to succeed, the fiscal (and, to some extent, human) resources must be garnered from resources external to the institute/organization (e.g., through endowments or scholarships). Previously noted literature identified the need to build networks of relationships with local groups and communities that are external to the university and to find critical voices who will apply pressure to change the status quo. With regard, specifically, to the process of building CBPR and health-promotion training for First Nations

and American Indian students, these findings are echoed in the following six points, points that I identify as critical for success:

1. Build networks and relationships: others will share your passion for social justice and social change.
2. Understand the historical and/or root causes of the status quo: this requires an in-depth understanding of the social and political contexts.
3. Find critical voices: in the absence of personal experience, build networks and relationships with those affected by the issue and those who are in a position to “champion” the cause.
4. Reflect those voices in your plan and demonstrate your commitment to them: be responsive/flexible to their ongoing participation in the development, delivery, and assessment processes.
5. Secure financial support (and finances to support human resources): secure this support through networks and advocates.
6. Build opportunities to formalize the role of critical voices in the learning design and delivery of the program: do this on an ongoing basis.

## CONCLUSION

The future of UCE depends, in part, on responding to visionary statements relevant to diversity and non-traditional learners. To do so means creating and nourishing equal and open partnerships with external partners, as suggested by Haughey (2006) and Nesbit et al. (2007); this must be motivated by a sincere desire to be proactively engaged in the development and facilitation of UCE for the purposes of transformational learning, social justice, and advocacy. Success will depend, to a large extent, on reflective practices that are based on the work of critical social theorists and on thinking “outside the box” and outside the physical confines of traditional venues for university education.

Haughey (1998) wrote that “as the role of university extension educators becomes more restricted, they must rethink what they are doing. Increasingly, this will necessitate a reconstruction of their work in social action as a more intellectual pursuit” (p. 109). As I reflect on my experiences in the current context of UCE, I agree that the future of university continuing adult education units will be enriched by, and possibly saved by, thoughtful reflection and a positive response to this call for a passionate, dedicated, and creative commitment to education for social justice.

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