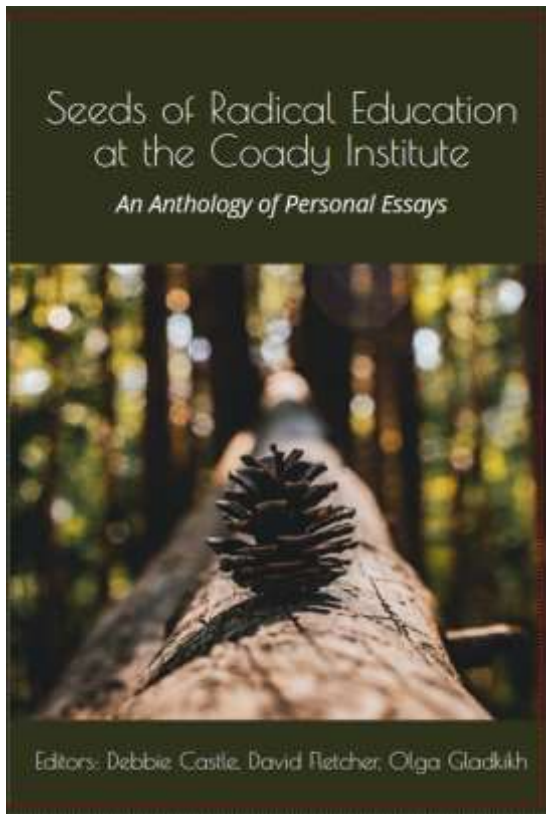


Weaving the Fabric: co-curating participatory community learning spaces

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WEAVING THE FABRIC: CO-CURATING PARTICIPATORY COMMUNITY LEARNING SPACES

natty abdou

At heart I am lifelong learner.

My connection and place of belonging within the community at the Coady International Institute empowered me to better understand what that statement means. The Coady provided me with the language of participatory, people-centered learning, of transformative education, of a constant process of reflection and action. It was in the hallways, classrooms, offices of colleagues that I was shaped, mentored, formed into a facilitator and curator of space, always aware of the ways in which I am constantly learning and growing within this work and in my life. I am truly in an ongoing process of embodied praxis, of using the wisdom of the whole of my body and being to reflect, learn and grow. I imagine I will continue to learn up until the moment I take my last breath. My mentors and friends at the Coady are living ancestors¹ along my journey of naming, engaging in and ever-evolving in the wonderful and abundant realms of transformative learning and community change, and my own understanding of what it means to be a lifelong learner.

So, what does it mean to me to be a lifelong learner?

It means I understand my life as a series of experiences, and with each experience there is the precious opportunity to reflect on that experience, and with it a buffet of questions to support me in making greater meaning of a simple or complex moment:

What happened?
Why did it happen?
What did I notice – in my mind, in my body?
How did I feel?
Were there any surprises?
What was easeful?
What was challenging?
How did I relate to myself, to others?

There are an infinite number of unique questions one can ask. Ultimately, these questions create the space for greater understanding and prepare me to ask the all-encompassing question “What have I learned from this experience?” By gaining a deeper understanding of key learnings, I then have new information and power in my hands to carry forward, to apply and put toward other experiences and moments as they arise. This act of reflection and action in its instinctual, cyclical nature is continuously informing and reshaping the way I move through world. It allows me to reflect and better understand the values that inform my being, and as such, the way I act and react toward myself and all others — be it the land, creatures or human beings. This for me, is the root of social justice.

This embodied, relational praxis is the heart of community learning – mental, physical, spiritual, emotional² learning that takes place with two or more, which can happen almost anywhere, and carries with it the intention to learn and willingness to be fundamentally reshaped in how we relate to ourselves and beyond. Each learning moment is an invitation to look closely at our own inner workings (personal), to understand how our realities connect, intertwine and conflict with one another (interpersonal), and how these dynamics are set within and are affected by the greater context both locally and globally (systemic). We are asked to embrace our uniqueness, honour others’ differences and ensure our communities make space for us all — so every living thing can exist in its natural state of wholeness and birth right of well-being.

Space

Community learning, in essence, is a created space for individuals to come together, to share, listen, reflect, stretch³, grow and heal alongside one another. We can create a space that says welcome and by welcome, I mean, we welcome the whole of you — mind, heart, body, soul — into this learning space. We enter this space fully, so the learning we share brings out the depth of experience and wisdom we each carry within us. This means acknowledging and engaging with the depth of embodied knowledge that exists within us — the whole of our physical being has awareness and lessons to impart. When we begin from this place, we not only honour ourselves, we honour all those who came before us and the environment. All the ancestors whose stories and teachings exist in our cellular memory⁴, shape our existence and beckon our being are here at this time. What a relief, is it not, to be able to rest on the wisdom of the land and generations before and not have to rely on the illusion we must figure it all out ourselves? We create a space that is ready to hold the multiplicity of our being.

In gathering in any learning space there is also a container that holds us — the physical space itself, and it too is a relevant **participant** among the community of learners. The space is our greeter, the first one to welcome a group of learners coming together. We can create a space that offers an embrace, as though the room is yelling in exuberance, “Hello! you, yes, you are in the right place, I have been waiting for you. Please come in and find a spot. That spot is yours and has been waiting just for you.” The placement of tables and chairs, the messaging that appears in the space are all important elements that provide clues to learners as to what their experience might hold. A room with clusters of tables, with tables in a U-shape formation or with chairs in a circle, each provide different and relevant information upon greeting. Space has an impact on the body, and as such, learning.

Once gathered, I trust. I trust those who come to a workshop, be it two hours or days long, are the ones who were meant to be there. Often the numbers shift and someone cannot arrive as hoped, while another appears at the door unexpectedly and very eager. Sometimes a learning space finds itself with a few people gathered, seemingly too few for a community of learning. Those gathered for this particular learning journey are much like a constellation of stars — a constellation of learning, perfect in its formation and purpose. And so, the learning community is born.

Creating

What do I mean by a learning community⁵? I believe when we come together to reflect and learn alongside one another we form a community, one that will journey together for that time. Regardless of whether they come knowing one another, embedded in each other's lives, communities and work, or whether they come from far and wide, unknown to one another, never to see each other again, at this time we come together to co-create. In the spirit of risk-taking and willingness, we bring ourselves and our ideas to blend and take new forms, much like a fabric that is being woven, each thread critical and unique in its contribution to the whole.

The weaving of a fabric and a learning community is delicate (and quite frankly often a messy, unpredictable experience) which is why process and preparation are critical. As a facilitator, we are the curators of the process and learning journey. We are gifted with the responsibility of designing the path on which we move along as a learning community. This role is really an honour because as facilitators we have the privilege of gathering (ideally before or at the beginning of a learning journey) what participants hope for in this experience. The gathering of hopes, apprehensions, curiosities and questions are our sources, guides and muses in the creation of a facilitation design. Whether we are curating a design from scratch or drawing on existing materials, the particular design that manifests is in response to this particular formation — with its social, political, economic, geographic, local and global implications. The design is entirely informed and dependent on the people who will come to breathe life into it. The same design will yield a different reality given who gathers.

Gathered

And so here we are, gathered. With a plan in hand and all the vitality and excitement of embarking on an unknown experience with people we often do not know. What rises within me is a sense of anticipation, blended with subtle fears of the unknown. As a facilitator, and lifelong learner, I am a co-learner with other participants and arrive with presence, humility and authenticity to the dual role of being learner and guide along the way. I often encounter new insights that expands my understanding of what social justice and change looks, feels, tastes, smells like to a particular learning community. I get invited into the specific context, language, capacities, challenges, deep hopes and vivid imagination of a particular group. I recently co-facilitated for folks involved in the accessibility of e-books — testers, librarians, format producers and government representatives. I learned so much about a world I knew

nothing about. It was invigorating and a privilege to share in the abundance of all that matters to a learning community.

To delve deeply, we need to build enough collective trust to stretch and grow with one another. Establishing community agreements can support us in authentically doing this. What are community agreements? It is a set of common understandings reached by group consensus that allow learners to express what they require from themselves and one another, to feel **safe enough** in the space. I say **safe enough** because I believe safe space is a fallacy. We can never know how someone's inner reality will respond to the learning and experiences that take place. They can cause a response that is challenging, deeply vulnerable or even harmful. Yet we can strive as a community to create a space that genuinely welcomes the diversity of each participant. That is easier said than practiced, and so, our learning community becomes a testing ground (or playground if we can maintain a spirit of fun) in which we practice what it looks and feels like to respect and value ourselves and others, simultaneously. This values-based process of reaching community agreements, and our commitment to uphold them, shifts the responsibility of holding the space from the facilitator to the collective. We are all then weavers of our space and time together, responsible for our collective learning process. This is the seed of participatory learning.

Stretching

We have invited a diversity of experiences, knowledges, skills and attitudes into the room. There are moments when the learning feels easy, joyful and collectively synergistic, feeding our sense of belonging and connection to the learning community and often to the whole of life. It is inevitable we will encounter tensions and conflicts that will stretch, challenge or even fracture us. These moments are part of the natural order of ecosystems, diversity and transformation. They are tremendously rich opportunities for expansion and to learn in the discomfort. If we remain honest and open, we may find within ourselves the capacity to be shifted in our beliefs and values, to unlearn and relearn. If we are vulnerable and honest, willing to share our truth and listen to that of others, then we can create an opening for bridge building. In doing so, we step closer to cocreating a reality in which a multitude of realities can live alongside one another respectfully. As a community, we can develop even greater connection, bonding and strength in navigating our way through to the other side of these courageous moments versus running away from or avoiding them. These moments of tension or conflict challenge us to truly practice our values and agreements with greater

commitment and determination. Like that part of a fabric where the threads have clumped, twisted, or fallen out of harmonious pattern, leaving a distinct mark that adds to its uniqueness and authenticity.

Presence

To nurture full participation in learning is to create a space where the whole of the learner can be activated. Engaging the intellect and creativity of our whole systems — the full spectrum of thought, feeling and embodied wisdom — can allow us to be curious and encounter new perspectives. In doing so, it is not about working toward a particular agenda or clearly defined goals. These things are necessary, but they are not the essence of the learning. It is about being present — an intuitive presence⁶. I believe deeply in preparedness along with a willingness to abandon the agenda based on what is happening in real time. Being intuitively present means being attuned to each person in the space, conscious of the relationship dynamics, gently inquisitive about subtleties beneath the surface and knowing when to follow the collective impulse of the group. Taking the time to go off track is actually what ensures we are being authentic in our learning and present to the conversations and questions which are most alive⁷ in the room, rather than playing out a script. This takes deep trust in our intuition and capacity as facilitators to hold space for what participants are truly asking for in the now. Our willingness as facilitators to fearlessly adapt in this way then encourages learners to develop their own agency, sovereignty and sustainability within the learning. This is what is meant by deep participatory learning.

It is in this place that learning is at its most exciting and invigorating. I recall a time with a cohort of 12 participants in the Facilitation course — with such a small group we were able to really delve deep into our reflections and learning as a group. We developed strong bonds and participants felt ample space for their voice and opinions to be heard and valued. As we approached the end of the course, participants shared their final practicums and many of their sessions guided us in reflecting and synthesizing learning from our time together. It was remarkable — they essentially took on the role of facilitators and led our closing sessions, using their intuition, creativity and skills collaboratively. At the end of the day, it was clear for participants their learning journey felt complete, they felt full and another round of reflection would be redundant. As a class, we renegotiated what to do with our remaining time and decided taking a trip to the local beaches would be a much more fruitful

way of spending our last day together and celebrating our learning. Participants' adaptation and guidance of our space and process in this way are always good signs to me, as a facilitator; I know that we have created a space and dynamic that truly empowers participants to guide us along our journey.

Woven

Our learning community can be viewed as a lab for life — a place to test and practice what is possible in an environment where there is enough safety, collective agreement and structure to support us in experimenting with new ways of being and relating. Then we get to harvest from our collective experience — gather what has worked, what doesn't work, what has surprised us, and imagine what we might do differently next time. This process of reflection and learning is ever rippling beyond the space as we carry it forward, and it continues to unfold in our lives and communities. This is the catalytic moment when our learning nourishes our convictions and passion for social justice and transformation.

The capacity that we develop through our learning to change and adapt is critical in reimagining and re-indigenizing how we relate to and feel our place within the larger web of life. We can begin to create new balance and harmony in the ecosystems that we are a part of — be it in our physical bodies, our local and global communities, the natural environment. We gain valuable lessons on what is sustainable from our strengths and capacities as much as do from our challenges and how we navigated them. These moments of learning and change provide evidence and inspiration in respecting and nurturing greater diversity and co-existence.

Our time as a learning community will always exist. It will always be there for us to come back to, to remember, be reaffirmed and re-inspired by. A community of support emerges through memories and life-long friendships that remind us of what we need to remember.

I love my work and am grateful for the Coady community in which I have rooted and grown within this formative decade of my practice. I have been influenced by many people, organizations and collaborations beyond the Coady over the years, and my consistent connection to the Coady meant I was always embedded in a community committed to participatory learning. I return time and again to cross-pollinate alongside my mentors and

colleagues, to ruminate and gain clarity on evolving ideas, and practice new and creative approaches to learning. As a facilitator and lifelong learner, my own learning is deeply shaped and sustained by being part of a community of learners connected with others on this journey. The whole of my being and consciousness has been, and continues to be, fundamentally shifted in this passion. It inspires how I relate to myself and all of life day-to-day and feeds by faith in a more awakened Earth community. Bless up⁸, down and all around to learning alongside one another for life, one precious relationship and moment woven into the next.

Thank you, shokran, for listening.

Endnotes

¹ Living ancestors is a term for the mentors who informed my early and on-going understanding of transformative learning. I say thank you to all.

² I acknowledge here the indigenous teachings of the medicine wheel — Miigwech, Wela'lin.

³ Stretch is a tool named in The Zones from the YES! Community (www.yesworld.org).

⁴ O'Neill, E. (2012). The Place of Creation; Transformation, Trauma and Re-rooting Creative Praxis in Radical Human Ecology: Intercultural and Indigenous Approaches. UK: Ashgate; Constellations from a Knowing Field Perspective in The Knowing Field: International Journal of Systemic Constellations, Vol 21.

⁵ The term **learning communities** was written about by Wolff-Michael Roth and Lee Yew Jinand inspired by the work of Ettiene Wenger and Jean Lave around **communities of practice**.

⁶ The term **intuitive presence** is from Dr. Moyo Mutamba Rainos sharing an indigenous approach to learning and change rooted in Zimbabwe (www.ubuntulearningvillage.blogspot.com)

⁷ Terminology from the YES! Community (www.yesworld.org) and Art of Hosting (www.artofhosting.org).

⁸ **Bless up** is a Grenadian term reference to giving gratitude to “god, spirit, source.

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