

# **Communication Technologies & Leadership for Resilience: Participatory Research Outreach in Five Coastal Communities**

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## **Introduction**

Coastal communities of Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) have experienced since 1992 the collapse of their major industry, the cod fishery and associated processing plants, and an out-migration of approximately half their populations. Added to this, a newly elected provincial government—while “encouraging” people to move to growth centres through the closure of community development offices, and the downsizing of schools and health facilities—has committed itself to “tough business decisions” and dramatic deficit reductions. This paper explores various means of communication—camcorders, interviews, videoconferences, brochures, computers, and workshops—used by a team of participatory researchers as we work with five outport communities along the south coast of Newfoundland in assessing the impact of new technologies on education, health care and small business. Aware that there is more to participatory research (PR) than description and analysis, we outline here various forms of outreach as we try to make a difference in the communities and, we hope, leave them better off for our participation. We believe that, if change is to be lasting, leadership must shift from our hands, as facilitators, to those of local leaders.

## **The Context**

Several problems, each embedded in the province’s 500 years of European history, confront the “participatory” project’s success. The first surrounds a lingering colonialism, the second inheres in the isolation of communities, and a third springs from traditional social arrangements. The three are socially, culturally and economically rooted, as are the strengths of coastal Newfoundlanders which assist the participatory project. Positive aspects include people’s social cohesion, knowledge of the land and sea, cultural expression in arts and crafts, and resilience to a harsh climate.

Newfoundland, unlike other provinces, emerged from official colonial status to join Canada only in 1949. As a colonial outpost, it experienced paternalistic governance and the economic control of merchants who were, in turn, directed by the policies of the Mother country. Since Confederation, provincial and federal governments and national and multi-national corporations have directed, through the fishery, the socio-economic and educational trajectory of the province. Because of these influences, among others, Newfoundlanders are said to suffer from dependency and, now, to be somewhat lacking in entrepreneurial initiative; and we note that the people themselves have accepted the common construction of their dependency. We certainly observe this in people’s reluctance to step forward and take responsibility for their futures. While each community has its leaders, the majority prefer to leave decision-making to others.

Despite real or perceived dependency, remarkable examples of independence and collective initiative exist. In the early 1980s, for example, the coastal town of Burgeo pioneered a “narrow-band” television system. Through the medium of the not-for-profit Burgeo Broadcasting System (BBS), people in the town of then 2500 produced local news,

entertainment and political commentary. Between 1997-99, as a response to the crisis in the fishery, two adult educators successfully extended the scope of learning through the BBS, adding video presentations and newsprint, to neighbouring communities in a project called *Communication for Survival*, only to see the project end through lack of funding and political support (Campbell & Gilbert, 1997; Harris, 2002).

In part to fill that gap, the BBS (population now 1700) in 2000 installed information and communication technologies (ICT)--i.e., broadband internet and video conferencing--in their town, on Ramea Island (pop. 700), and in the smaller communities of Grand Bruit (pop. 36), Grey River (pop. 150) and Francois (pop. 180). At the same time, the provincial Library system, with funding from the Bill Gates Foundation, installed Community Access Programmes (CAP sites) in the communities, each site equipped with computers, printers, scanners and digital cameras. As I was known in the region from previous research, I was asked to evaluate the new technologies. This I agreed to do, with a research team drawn from both east and west coasts of Canada. We involved the people who were using the new technologies, and--given women's contributions to the ecology of rural life, and their under-representation in technology--focused on the contributions of women.

### **Conceptual Framework**

We entered the field in 2002 with three guiding assumptions. The first was that educational reality -- and leadership in technology and community development is an educational accomplishment--must be understood through a framework of lifelong learning. For this reason, we examine learning as a social process that extends from pre-school into adulthood. The second assumption was that we need to critically examine technology as more than simply a tool (Moll 2000). We share Heidegger's (1977) view that it comes with the potential both to strengthen and undermine society but, in any event, will alter people's way of being. The third assumption was that communication lies at the heart of resilience, and that the people affected by change provide the best lens through which to explore this resilience. To this end, we encourage local people (those without previous experience in leadership, as well as community activists, priests, businessmen, school principals and teachers) to take an active part in the evaluation of ICT with a view to steering their future direction.

Borrowing from Foucault's (1980) interlocking concepts of power/knowledge, this study builds on the inextricable link between knowledge and the kind of power that emerges as people engage in their world. In this, we hold with Blaug (1977) that "the social world confronts us as something which is partly pre-given and partly the creation of our own actions. To learn is therefore both to make and to discover" (p. 101). While it is said that we live in a 'knowledge society,' we point to the distinction between gaining knowledge *about* the world (as gained through an accumulation of facts) and knowledge *of* the world, through engagement with it (Ryle, 1990).

### **Coming to Participatory Methods**

In my previous research, I attempted to gain knowledge *about* the world. As an 'interpretive' researcher, I went about the business of constructing a theoretical picture of the world, interviewing people to learn about their experiences and the meanings they held, and then proceeded to analyse their words in relation to my theoretical image of the world. While that approach, I believe, successfully advanced my understanding of reality (and, I hope, that of others), I became convinced that it failed to speak to the people whose needs were greatest. I always left the research site wondering if I had contributed in any substantial way.

I sensed the need for a more action-oriented approach. What I read about participatory research (PR) seemed to fit the bill. But I had no experience of this whatsoever. To rectify that, I enlisted the help of two adult educators, Darlene Clover as co-investigator, and Budd Hall as an advisor. Both, having worked and written extensively in the field of PR (e.g., Hall, 1994), contributed greatly to my own background in organizational studies as we came to five major precepts concerning PR. First, and relevant to my doubts above, the research must be of direct benefit to the community. Second, it must be part of a total educational experience, helping to develop a cyclic pattern of local and new knowledge. Third, the research must involve an interaction “between the community and the research facilitator(s), and between popular and academic knowledge” (Gormley, 2001, p. 42). Next, our political bias had to be not only recognized, but built into our research approach. Thus we acknowledge our stance with the coastal communities in their struggle both against corporate fisheries, and a government that would have the people relocate to ‘growth centres.’ Finally, and most importantly, our research is intended to build upon people’s creativity and imagination in bringing their collective will to bear in solving their own problems.

The research team, selected with these precepts in mind, included several graduate students knowledgeable in communication technologies, and people who shared the culture--and dialect--of community participants. Of the latter, Brenda is a NL feminist and sociologist who has worked extensively with women fishers (Grzetic, 2004), and Lorraine is the director of a woman’s centre in a nearby town. Fred, charged with making a video/ DVD for our project, was one of the initiators of *Communities for Survival*. Darlene is the adult educator, while I bring 20 years of experience in NL education to the project.

### **Participatory Research as Outreach**

Given the assumptions about PR, it is not surprising that methods, findings and outreach became threads of one tapestry. Our outreach activities *are* our research methods and, through these, findings emerge. The first activity, on-going throughout the study, involved team members in visits to each of the 5 sites at least twice yearly. On two occasions, I made preparatory visits, talking with people about the team and our planned activities. The establishment of trust between researchers and participants cannot be accomplished quickly. Community members reminded us often that “officials” rarely come to them, preferring to make decisions from distant towns and cities that affect outport economies, schools, and health care delivery. We were told, by outside workers, about their fear of rough seas, and that they might become stormbound on the coast. While community people do not show resentment towards outsiders, they maintain a certain wariness. We had to prove to them that we cared about their futures, and that we were tenacious in accomplishing their objectives, as well as our own.

Other links with the communities were made through our website, posters and brochures. In the first year of the study, graduate students designed a website which described all aspects of the study--sites, research team, partners, and our desire to form a community/university collaboration. Later, we designed brochures and laminated posters with much the same information; the brochures we gave out to individual participants, and the posters we placed in all public bulletin boards including those on the three ferries serving the coast.

Community workshops, a feature of our original study design, became the centrepiece of the project, and the most effective form of early outreach. It was here that we

learned details about social activities, economic projects, and participants' use of the new technologies. We also learned that people perceived a serious lack of training for the technologies and that, in some cases, decisions had been made for them without their knowledge or consent. It was also in the workshops that we began to fully appreciate that people were unable to imagine new uses for the technologies that were, as yet, unfamiliar to them. At this stage, we team members reluctantly stepped out of our participatory role to suggest ways forward (Clover & Harris, 2003).

Halfway through our study, we produced an extensive report, addressed to the local Planning Committee for the BBS/ICT Initiative, of our findings and recommendations for the development of the new technologies. We used this as a discussion piece for our meeting with seven committee members. It was our impression that the Committee had very little prior knowledge about either the technical difficulties encountered by their employees, or community perceptions of the implementation process. In addition to this de-briefing session with the BBS, we circulated the report to our funding agency and to all project partners, following the latter with phone calls and meetings.

In this our last year of the project, having heard what the people said about technology, we have initiated five important outreach activities. The first is to hold, in collaboration with two faculty members from a regional college, a 3-day workshop in community development for leaders who have been identified *by community committees* for participation. This workshop covered such topics as making effective presentations, preparing business applications on the internet, conducting internet research, facilitating effective meetings, and building consensus; it also featured, at the request of community members, an overview and demonstration of medical uses for the video conferencing equipment. Our objective was to encourage organizational understanding, as well as technological skills. As a follow-up to this residential workshop, we are cooperating with the Dave, the man in charge of installing and maintaining ICT, in offering workshops on technical aspects of the equipment. For three days in each community, Dave will be available to individuals during the day, and will hold group workshops in the evenings.

A third outreach this year was undertaken by a graduate student, with Dave's permission, to write a short, humorous article about some of the technical difficulties and misunderstandings he encountered while installing the new technologies. This has been submitted to a nationally popular (among Newfoundlanders) magazine. The format provides an easily accessible entry into the difficulties and successes of the BBS/ICT project.

Yet another outreach initiative was to hire on contract Amy from Burgeo, a graduate in Community Development, to 1) facilitate meetings within communities, and discussions between communities, using video conferencing, and 2) meet with youth in their schools to talk about community development, new technologies and how these can be used in the service of the communities.

The final outreach this year involves the making of a video/DVD presentation, showing adults, youth and children as they talk about their experiences with new technological applications of distance learning (by internet and video conference); the computers, printers, digital cameras and scanners provided in their Community Access Programs; the few uses that have been made of telemedicine; and businesses that could benefit from more effective communicative links with the outside world. In this video of approximately 40 minutes, people describe how valuable many of the new technologies are for reaching their relatives and friends who have moved away, or who have left for seasonal work, planning to return. They tell about a few businesses that are being carried out by

distance through the internet. They describe social and economic features of their communities, the organizations that they prize, business starts in kelp products and hydroponic vegetable farming, and plans for eco-tourism and a new fishery cooperative. But they also speak about their lack of involvement when ICT was placed in their communities, and in the implementation of these new technologies; and of their need, now, for training and exposure to the new equipment, and their fear of the unknown—that they may damage the expensive video-conference equipment.

Participants in the video also talk about technical issues, such as the breakdown of the video transmission when the weather is bad, and what this means to their school lessons or public meetings. School students speak appreciatively of their distance learning teachers, but they also say, especially the female students, that they cannot take more than three courses simultaneously by this means. Distance learning, unsupervised or under-supervised by teachers in the schools, demands independence of students, and intense powers of concentration.

As we move into the final phase of our PR, applications of the video/DVD will play a central role. The issues introduced on the video will provide excellent stepping stones to conversations about our project and plans for the future. It will also illuminate, for these communities and others, the findings we have made about such things as top-down implementation, the dominance of technical concerns over social and pedagogical interests, the planned obsolescence of the technologies, and the uneasiness, resistance, and indifference expressed by people when they experience little ownership of new technologies.

### **Discussion of Leadership for Resilience**

To this point, our story has been about the leadership role we play as participatory researchers. Admittedly, it is one of trying to transfer leadership from ourselves to community members. At first consideration, this should not be difficult; there are local committees in place in each community, and easily identifiable leaders. The two towns are led by men, two communities primarily by women, and the third community has a fairly even gender distribution, all with markedly differing patterns of involvement—some far more democratically organized than others. We strongly believe that communication among the communities will result in a cross-fertilization of practices, ideas and imagination that can only benefit everyone. The new technologies will play a large role in this exchange, and in the consequent breakdown of barriers.

Several outcomes of this study of PR, leadership and rural community resilience warrant comment. The first points to the advantage of inter-disciplinarity, in this case, the joining of forces among organizational theorists, adult educators, community activists, and sociologists of gender and the fishery. The commonality essential to the success of our project lies in the critical gaze of each researcher. None of us is satisfied with the world as it is but, rather, we strive for one of more equitable opportunities and greater distribution of wealth between those prospering from an oil-rich province, and people marginalized in coastal settings.

Then there are the balances that we identify. One concerns a balance between communities and academe. In Foucauldian terms, the knowledge and thus the power of these two groups would lie disproportionately with university researchers. The diffusion of this knowledge/power arrangement can only be accomplished through another balance – that between theoretical knowing and local traditional knowledge. Local people benefit from experiencing learning as a 2-way street, and from seeing that researchers as well as they are

formulating new ideas for action. The recognition of these balances at the outset of study may facilitate greater participation and more equitable outcomes.

Yet another balance lies at the intersection of school and community as study sites. All too often, school/community committees (e.g., school councils in Canada) with their legislated composition of parents, business people and one or two school representatives substitute for truly democratic involvement. In our study, the equipment tended to be housed in schools and used for distance learning. As people met together in our workshops, they realized their lack of ownership of the technology for health care, community meetings, and other civic purposes.

Finally, we point out that democratic participation at any level demands a widening of the net for potential leaders. Established community leaders benefit from hearing of the gap that often exists between their own 'knowledge' and that held by others. In our study, we unearthed ignorance as well as knowledge, and silences as well as voices. Only communication—whether as face-to-face encounters or by new technologies—can close the gap of democratic participation for resilience. But we believe that this will not take place without facilitation. We hope that our limited time in the communities, training delivered on site by the BBS Director of Community Services, and now facilitation provided for one year by a local woman will catch fire and spread through each community. We are cautiously optimistic that it will.

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