

**Technology and humanities at the crossroads:  
A principal's dilemma as a matter of principle<sup>1</sup>**

**Carol E. Harris**

**University of Victoria, Canada**

In an educational system dominated by technology, critical theory and post-structuralism provide significant questions about power, knowledge and other political interests for those who would preserve a balance between science and technology, on the one hand, and discursive and artistic expression, on the other.

***The Context***

Forty years ago, C. Wright Mills (1959) warned his readers not to become so consumed with the problems of everyday life that they would neglect the larger issues of society. Critical theory, from which Mills spoke, provides a powerful lens through which we can see the large-scale conflicts and contradictions in which our daily problems are embedded. It helps us, moreover, to understand educational policies and interests that are served by them. A post-structural lens, like that of critical theory, illuminates the manner in which those who wield power and knowledge control others at the margins of society (Foucault, 1980). It provides, moreover, a “voice” for marginalized groups, and a means of charting ways of resistance to grand narratives of “truth.”

Critical theory and post-structuralism do not cancel each other out, the one showing only societal structures and the other only the shifting sands of meaningful discourse. Together, rather, they reveal human constructions of leadership and followership, dominance and sub-dominance, power and resistance and, always, the possibility that things, as they seem to be, could be (and sometimes are) arranged otherwise (Greene, 1998). Each lens is used in framing the work of Principal Patricia (Pat) Marsden of Cape LaHune, a once-thriving fishing village, suffering since 1992 from the collapse of the East Coast fishery and the closure of its fish processing plant. This essay focusses on two forms of communication fostered by Principal Marsden—one technological and the other artistic—and the tension that arises between policies and practices that support these apparently disparate ways of knowing. We can think of this tension as the immediate problem, while the larger educational issue remains that of identifying the sort of communication that, potentially, can enhance participatory democracy. While the situation applies here to a specific community-in-crisis, the issue of balancing various forms of communicative action is of central importance to all educators.

My findings, as part of a larger study of educational restructuring, emerge from a three-year examination of this high school principal and master-teacher, especially well-known for her contributions to the Fine Arts. Pat attends also to aspects of her community environment physically apart from, yet socially connected with, the school, e.g., hospital services, the town council, regional college boards, and youth programs. In fighting for the very survival of her community, she has raised substantial funds for computer technology, initiated a variety of adult education programs based in the school, and secured salaries for contractual helpers. She is currently the main advocate and committee chairperson for a major telecommunications development that, centred in Cape LaHune, would service health-care, education, and small business projects over a large portion of the adjacent coastline.

### ***Concepts Defined***

In these introductory paragraphs, two phrases call for further definition before we proceed with the story of Pat's struggle to enhance communication among coastal communities. Regarding "educational leadership," we see many productive examples in education. One type of leader maintains programs and structures to the best of her ability, given the latest rules and regulations from the governing bureaucracies—school boards and, in Canada, provincial Ministries of Education. I am interested here primarily in "emancipatory" leadership (Foster, 1989; Smyth, 1989), however, where the leader encourages others to push traditional boundaries of understanding and action. This type of leader, following Mills' distinction, asks people to tackle immediate problems while, by acting together, they gain an ever-growing appreciation of larger issues.

The word "communications" is used here in an interactive sense, where people share ideas in many forms, including "on-line", but where these ideas also take root and flourish in face-to-face dialogue. I am assuming, further, that such dialogue aims toward the ethical form outlined by Habermas (1990) as non-coercive, honest, and truth-seeking, and that it avoids as much as possible confrontational characteristics of debate as seen, for instance, in the parliamentary model. Moreover, I expect dialogue about current and proposed policy and/or practice to constantly ask *whose* interests are being served. Beyond the boundaries of discourse, I refer to communication as intuitive "ways of knowing" (Belenky et al., 1986) and as artistic "ways of seeing" (Berger, 1969). Finally, I assume that communication in coastal settings, if it is to lead to what Judy Rebick (2000) calls "small group democracy," must be widespread and inclusive of gender, ethnicity, and class.

### ***Recent History***

The effect of the fishery collapse and of the closure of the town's fish plant in Cape LaHune has been hard to calculate. On the one hand, the various government subsidies to the area allow the people to pursue what appears to be a healthy standard of living. Houses are painted and in good repair, pick-up trucks and ATVs are parked in driveways, and a cable TV receiver perches on every roof. A new health complex is located high above the town and, for those who desire shopping and services in larger towns, the long road out to the highway is paved. The people, however, desperately want work, especially now that the latest subsidies have dried up. Social conditions that inevitably accompany unemployment—such as family violence and drug and alcohol abuse—have increased in Cape LaHune, as have measures of declining health such as depression among the unemployed and tension within workplaces (Neis, 1998). The schools have experienced a steady decline in student numbers and, because school personnel are allocated by the Ministry according to numbers rather than programs, losses in teaching staff, maintenance support, and curricular offerings.

Over the past five years, Pat has successfully sought funds from a variety of government and corporate sources to tighten school and community links. Targeted funds have been used to establish a large-scale technology lab in the high school and to move the town's public library to her school. Both services are incorporated into an Adult Basic Education (ABE) program in the school, and are now widely used by community members.

In addition to the search for funding, Pat, like all rural principals, expends much time and effort attempting to bridge gaps in the curriculum. Through one-way television technology, students can take certain advanced courses but these, in my opinion, share many characteristics associated with the worst features of country schools at mid-century (cf. Harris, 1998). Course material, presented dryly for the most part, is based on a page-by-page coverage of the prescribed text. For each problem, one "right" answer is called for and a preferred methodology advanced. Pat, whose own study of foreign languages, the arts, and education has been lifelong, tries to remedy the direction of this shrinking curriculum through her own teaching. She presents "Canadian law" in a highly reflective and interactive manner, visiting the town's "travelling court" on a regular basis. But it is her theatre course that students love most, and that people in the town and neighbouring communities talk about. School drama productions over the years have gained notoriety within the community, school district and province; not only have they been award-winners, but several of them have delineated problem areas especially problematic to teenagers, such as alcoholism, dangerous driving, and date rape. Young people from the theatre group, moreover, play a particularly active role in local broadcasting as volunteers on the sets and as readers and actors.

An important experiment in community activism, centered on the Cape LaHune Broadcasting System (CLBS) and relevant to this paper, took place between 1995 and 1997. Two community amateurs, initiating and directing a program called Communication for Survival (CFS), involved members of five communities in either developing or, in the case of Cape LaHune, enhancing their local television broadcasting systems with discussion groups on the future of the fishery, on alternative economic ventures, and in an exploration of local culture through artistic forms of expression. The initiative itself, eventually to gain a prestigious award for community development, involved "an informal partnership of communities, agencies, groups and individuals from [the province who worked] together to promote the survival of rural communities through the sharing of ideas and information with the long-term goal of solving community and regional problems of common concern" (Campbell & Gilbert, 1997, p. 2). In many ways--such as in planning meetings, surveying public opinion, and televising panel discussions--CFS involved the people themselves in deciding upon their own priorities and approaches to community economic development.

In Pat's opinion, CFS "got the people talking. Dialoguing, in turn, created reflection, understanding and awareness. Then too, it gave people confidence to express things themselves, and go about doing things themselves. [In smaller communities] people traditionally keep their mouths shut. People don't want to rock the boat; they want to live their lives in peace and be left alone" (cf A. MacIntyre, 1998). I asked Pat if the CFS initiative also stimulated the people to work together. "Yes", she replied, "but you don't do that with a one or two-year project. This was almost three years, and even then, it left far too soon. The seeds were thrown out, but they were just taking root. CFS has left its mark, but ---". Pat's remark, trailing off in this way, left unsaid what I was to hear many, many times. Projects find funding by federal and provincial governments and other partners after months (or years) of research, planning, and feasibility studies, only to be discontinued after a short time as new approaches gain bureaucratic approval.<sup>2</sup>

### ***New Plan for Communication Links***

Perhaps Pat's most ambitious and promising search to date involves a massive plan for community sustainability through an interactive form of Information and Communications Technology (ICT). At a projected cost of two million, and with the Cape and the expertise of CLBS personnel at its hub, the ICT initiative proposes to connect in a rich variety of services five neighbouring coastal communities by an interactive telecommunications network. Some of the educational benefits outlined by Pat and her committee will include diagnostic health services, access to and transmission of interactive school courses, classes in adult basic literacy, information to the outside world of tourist attractions and available crafts, and a means whereby youth and adults can exchange information through forms of artistic expression.

Following a positive external feasibility study, most "partners" have offered moral and financial support. The strength of the plan rests on the proven track record of the CLBS, the cooperative public ownership of this broadcasting system, an already planned school-community complex, and an existing health care facility. But how can such an overwhelming reliance on technology be squared with Pat's passion for the arts-in-education and, further, how will technology clash with the arts and culture of a traditional people?<sup>3</sup> She outlined for me how these forms of expression could overlap and complement one another.

### ***Technology and the Arts as Tools of Resistance***

Readily acknowledging that computer and other media technologies can be either personalizing (in that we can talk with anyone at any time or distance) or de-personalizing in their isolated application, Pat maintains that they are, in either case, changing the social landscape of outport communities. It is up to the people themselves to decide on the form that this change will take. At present, the information is one-way only--from the outside to the communities. The broadcasting network, and its contributing influences, would offer communities the opportunity to gain *and impart* information that could empower them.<sup>4</sup> Despite the recent successes of the CFS team, there is still very little exchange of ideas and culture among the people of different communities on this coast. Consequently, there has been little intellectual brainstorming, economic cooperation, or artistic sharing. Even within communities, my larger study has uncovered few instances of political participation and cooperative action involving women. Pat, and others with whom I talked, acknowledge an acute need for communication and for group action.

The arts, Pat believes, can play a significant role in beginning the process by presenting information that "sticks with performers and audiences" and, at the same time, is "non-threatening." For example, "educational drama offers lessons "through vicarious experience, much as do qualitative research and works of fiction. The arts are more convincing in dealing with social and community issues. Rather than saying 'you have a drinking problem, or this community has a drug problem,' people will allow this message through music, song, dance and drama. They will sit and watch and take in the message without feeling that they are condemned, or that fingers are pointed at them. This source of entertainment also gives a time for reflection." Pat explained further that actors who write their own scripts, avoid the "intimidation of expression." Whereas a person might not stand and declare that he is alcoholic, he may well "do so on stage" where the words are "masked from the people who might point the finger." Pat believes that vital learning takes place when students "can go away and think about what they have said, and what they've done, and draw a lesson."

When Pat talks to me in this way about the learning potential of drama and, in other examples, about the cultural pride and expression of place that are brought about by music and the visual arts,<sup>4</sup> I begin to understand her dream of a two-way exchange of ideas. While the most urgent needs of the people are economic in nature, Pat realizes the interconnectedness of economic and political action. It is in the political realm that my research reveals important popular knowledges and desires that, through inter-community communication, can lead to a larger measure of solidarity than realized at present.

### ***Discussion***

Although Principal Marsden adopts the discourse of the market, a discourse necessitated by her need to gain funding, she realizes many aspects of her paradoxical situation. She is troubled by the apparent gap between the unending supply of information—only a key-stroke away from her students—and the compression of time needed for reflection upon information. This constraint is exacerbated by the loss of students, teachers, and programs, by bureaucratic (and highly centralized) policies, and by the constant restructuring of school districts.

The principal's dilemma, when analysed through a critical lens on educational restructuring, illuminates issues of justice in a neo-liberal economic and political context. Various ethical theorists have asserted that to treat different students equally is to ensure their inequality of condition. Likewise, staff and resources allocated equally to urban and rural schools only ensure students' inequality of educational opportunity. In Cape LaHune, this can be seen in program cuts to curriculum areas considered by residents to be essential for their survival—cuts to the practical (e.g., home economics, industrial arts) and fine arts (i.e., to the very areas that call most urgently for a multiplicity of “right” answers).

When considering a post-structural ethic of social responsibility, those propagating an unquestioning vision of technology are also found wanting (see Gutstein, 1999). Bauman (1993), for instance, reminds us that technology and information/knowledge “becomes problematic—and is experienced as crisis—when such knowledge collides” with contemporary settings in which a societal belief in the “commonality of fate” gives way to means-focused assistance for “those who need it” (p. 245). This move from an ethic of the common good to one of accounts and calculation, and of “value-for-money,” demands particular attention from all Canadians as we decide, collectively, on the fate of those in once-flourishing coastal communities. Do we desire the urbanization of all, or do we—like Principal Marsden—work to support coastal people in maintaining their traditional skills and talents, and in developing new approaches to their environment? The problems of a single coastal village, considered in this way, become major issues facing Canadians.

At issue, as well, is the very essence of participatory democracy. Hannah Arendt, whose work bridges the spheres of critical theory and of post-structuralism (McGowan 1998), warned that the neo-liberal promotion of individual, as opposed to public participation prepares the most hospitable environment for various forms of totalitarianism. It is through interaction in the *public* realm, that we form a sense of “identity.” She wrote that “compared with the reality which comes from being seen and heard, even the greatest forces of intimate life—the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses—lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized, and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance” (Arendt 1958, p. 53). In terms of Principal Marsden's plan for technology to deliver on its potential, the performative arts as well as discursive practices, must be utilized by the people themselves as they confront the problems they identify. In exploring language, in all its

guises, “we can find our own answers, and come to understand truths about a whole range of experiences in which we have not participated.... [and] enter into communication (question, think, reflect) with new thought, ideas, possibilities (MacIntyre, 1995, p. 182). These calls for renewed attention to participatory democracy, one situated broadly and the other specifically from the Atlantic provinces, resonate with the theme of this essay--that vibrant and imaginative communication among the people themselves must accompany any lasting renewal of rural/coastal communities.

### ***Endnotes***

<sup>1</sup> I wish to acknowledge with gratitude funding from SSHRCC which made this study possible. In this essay, pseudonyms are used for all names of persons and places; certain other details non-essential to the findings, as well, have been fictionalized in order to further protect identities.

<sup>2</sup> Pat told me that her committee members are always in search of "creative funding," adjusting their language and even their plans to meet the demands of agencies: “You just have to figure out what channels [funds] are coming out through, and what language they are going to use, and what type of proposal is needed to acquire them. An awful lot of energy is expended trying to maintain the things that you have, that you have discovered work within your own community, and wording that in the government proposal so that it fits. [However] it seems to be the only way that you can acquire the resources that are critical for running your own programs in your own communities.”

<sup>3</sup> Another concern of mine surrounded gender implications of such a technological expansion in schools, already fiercely focused on computerized learning. With colourful stories, Pat placed the “problem” of girls-in-technology within much larger issues of gender construction. As for the predominance of males, she declared, “you’re not going to change that until women are in there, changing the language--writing the programs.”

<sup>4</sup> In discussing the arts, and limiting my comments to arts-as-communication, I have purposely ignored their important contribution to culture and to people’s on-going “sense of themselves” (Harris, 1998). As MacIntyre (1995) maintains in the context of Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, “storytelling ... music, poetry, plays, novels, short stories celebrate life here, describing trials and tribulations, triumphs and good times” (p. 182). Such cultural expressions both bind people together and, a point not made by MacIntyre, provide abundant economic return.

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