

The Emancipatory Potential of "Community Arts": In Search of Three-Dimensionalityⁱ

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Adult educator Elizabeth Murray and her colleagues in Nova Scotia (from 1946 until the late 1960s) considered the performing arts to be essential animating components of community development. Although justifications for this were not clearly articulated at the time, Jürgen Habermas' concepts of human interests and of communicative action throw an important light on people's potential, with the arts as part of their everyday lives, to realize their own emancipatory powers.

Elizabeth Murray, spécialiste dans l'enseignement aux adultes, et ses collègues (de 1946 jusqu'à la fin des années 60) considéraient les arts de la scène comme des éléments essentiels au développement de la communauté. Bien que les fondements théoriques d'une telle position n'aient pas été explicitées à cette époque, nous constatons que le concept d'intérêt humain et de la théorie de la communication de Jürgen Habermas révèlent la potentialité des gens, soulignant l'importance des arts comme activité quotidienne, pour réaliser leurs pouvoirs d'émancipation.

Elizabeth Murray (1917-1996), a well-known school teacher, choral director, and community animator, in 1946 became the first field worker for Nova Scotia's newly formed Division of Adult Education. She and her colleagues in adult education inherited a rich history of social action from the momentum of the Antigonish Movement, the Danish folkschool tradition, and the values of the Social Gospel. Their primary purpose was to address the economic, social, and cultural needs of rural men and women as identified by the people themselves. They accomplished this through a series of residential folkschools and community short courses where large study sessions were followed by small discussion groups and which led, eventually, to cooperative action.

Parallel projects carried out by the Division and other adult agencies focussed on the arts. These included travelling libraries and exhibitions of paintings, residential schools for "community" arts, a provincial Festival of the Arts, and short courses, each of which was designed to enhance the performing arts and artistic leadership within communities. Why were the arts considered essential to community renewal--not only by artists like Murray but also by other members of the Division who had not experienced the arts firsthand? In this paper, the emancipatory potential of the arts is viewed through a Habermasian lens that considers human interests in technical progress, in "undistorted communication" (Habermas, 1984), and in "emancipation" (Habermas, 1971). As in the past, the arts are shown to be of fundamental importance to the search for personal and social identity, the expression of culture, and the identification of social problems and solutions. My argument builds on a five-year ethnography and life-history of Murray and her educational projects. The study involved archival searches, more than 90 interviews, and three summers in which I took part in Murray's annual plays-with-music, performed by the people of Tatamagouche in celebration of their own history. My focus here is on assumptions, shared by Betty Murray and her colleagues in Adult Education, about the pivotal role of the arts.

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A Habermasian Theory of Knowledge

Habermas, in the tradition of the Frankfurt School, builds his theories on a widely interdisciplinary foundation including philosophy, sociology, psychology, and art. For Habermas (1971), learning takes place in relationship to people's specific interests which, for analytical purposes, can be outlined in three general categories. First, there are *scientific-technical* interests, by which people desire to control and manipulate their material environment. Then there are the *practical-hermeneutic* interests, which motivate people to communicate with others in building a common understanding of "reality". We may speak of this as the impetus for a mutual construction of meaning. The third category of interest, and the focus of this paper, is *emancipatory and aesthetic*. When this interest is aroused and fulfilled, people seek and find greater freedom from the oppressive domination of others--from individuals and/or from the imperatives of an increasingly rationalized and bureaucratized society (or system). They do this through self-reflective discourse and artistic expression, and/or a combination of the two. Each person's engagement with one or more of the interest levels leads to his or her particular "taken-for-granted definitions and understandings of the world that give coherence and direction to everyday actions and interactions" (Welton, 1995, p. 141). This Habermas refers to as the life-world (*Lebenswelt*).

In his later work, Habermas (esp. 1984) concentrates on the latter two categories of human interest, elaborating on and refining requirements for enhanced communication within the life-world, and on the moral need for emancipation in which people free themselves from the more limiting aspects of their highly rationalized existence. He does this, first, by presenting conditions of communication that, if they are to lead to liberation, must be reciprocal, shared, and based on mutual understanding. They must be non-coercive and non-distortive, with the only force that of the better argument tempered by conditions of clarity, truth, justified warrants, and sincerity.

Much of the liberatory promise of art, and its link with an expanded life-world of communicative meaning, inheres in its problematizing of everyday reality. It challenges the perspectives we hold as normal and natural concerning each new situation. Our life-world at any given moment provides us with the structures through which we experience "reality". The kind of experiences that Habermas (1991) holds to be authentic, and liberating, are "possible only to the extent that the categories of the patterned expectations of organized daily experience collapse ... and the normality of foreseeable and accountable certainties are suspended" (p. 200). As Gadamer (1993) points out that, if we want to understand the meaning of another, we must remain open to that person, and not cling blindly to our own point-of-view--our own "fore-meaning" (pp. 268-269). Art, in always presenting the new, pushes the boundaries of one's expectations. It challenges each person's fore-knowledge of the world. It is, by definition, emancipatory (Marcuse, 1978).

From their intimate association with the arts, Frankfurt School theorists spoke of "man's dimensionality" and the inherent threat that an over-emphasis on the technical dimension of life would lead to a truncating of the whole person and, eventually, to "one-dimensional" man. Habermas, in stressing the importance of each interest sphere, not only focuses our attention on multi-faceted human potential, but also he provides a particularly relevant analytical tool for understanding the work of adult educators at mid-century.

The Adult Educators

At the end of World War II, as Canadians sought to re-invigorate their civil society, the government of Nova Scotia established a division of its educational wing that would concentrate on these purposes. Field representatives from the Department of Agriculture, in particular, requested help with their work among the rural adult population. Guy Henson, a well-known educator, undertook a study of specific needs and of successful approaches followed elsewhere. From the 1920s, Nova Scotia had had a successful blueprint for social action in the Extension Department at St. Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, and in the work of activist priests like J.J. Tompkins and M. Moses Coady. Catholics and Protestants alike were inspired by a gospel message that crossed denominational boundaries to unite people in an awakened interest in their fellow man. It was no accident that the early pioneers of socialism in Canada, such as J.S.

Woodsworth and Tommy Douglas, were clergymen. The social gospel tended to justify or even compel the church's intervention in politics.

Henson, whose own religious inspiration came from Anglican roots, formulated his plans for adult learning from studying international experiments as well as the Antigonish Movement and other Canadian experiments, such as the Extension initiatives of E.A.(Ned) Corbett at the University of Alberta. Outlining a modus operandi for adult education, and directives for action, Henson (1946) stressed the importance of local initiative and decentralized organizational control. The new Division must serve the needs of the people as perceived by them; and it must do so under the auspices of existing volunteer organizations and with the cooperation of government agencies. The program, offering vocation, civic, and cultural services, was to be at the grass-roots, working from and for ordinary people. Local schools would serve as community centres for organizational activities. Here the adults would find the materials they required--film equipment, radios, blackboards, musical instruments and record players, stage and kitchen facilities and, most importantly, basic libraries.

This emphasis on the school as a focal learning site meshed perfectly with the teachings of Dr. Mortimer Marshall, Professor of Education at Acadia University and with the young Elizabeth (Betty) Murray, who was assisting him by placing education students as study-group leaders in the rural communities surrounding the University. Betty's task was to ascertain the interests of local men and women and then arrange for education students to join appropriate study groups as resource persons. As she had a special aptitude for music, her own outreach took the form of choral singing and, after a single year at Acadia, she had a different community choir in rehearsal each night of the week.

Parallels between Betty Murray's work and Henson's plan for adult education were obvious. She became the third person hired by the Division in 1946, the first two being Charles Topshee, a former employee of the National Film Board, and John Hugh MacKenzie, a former school principal. Betty's role, as the first Field Representative, was to continue her work with adult groups, to try new teaching approaches, and to report back to her colleagues in Halifax. Shortly after this, Don Wetmore joined the team bringing with him years of experience in drama. From its inception, thus, the Division was distinguished from other adult agencies by its emphasis on the arts.

Residential Folkschools & Arts Initiatives.

Planners of the first residential folkschools identified a need for each art (or for "recreation", as these activities were often called). The folkschools, designed for rural people, involved staff from various voluntary groups and from government agencies. In spirit and in format, they followed the Danish model inspired by the 19th century activist, Bishop N. F. S. Grundtvig, who regarded education as a lifelong process, the most successful form of which involved people in dialogue with their neighbours. This emphasis on the development of individual competencies in a social context is consistent with the ideal of "educating people, not merely training them". In Nova Scotia folkschools, this was approached along two fronts during the ten days or so of residential living. First, there was a strong emphasis on developing an appreciation of local history and the rural setting that "gave a sense of identity, or worth, and of motivation". Related to this sense of unity with one's past and community, was the cultural development of the individual through the study of music, drama, folkdance, as well as economic issues and history. The arts were seen as "part of a well-balanced life" and as a "means for getting at the whole person".

Other residential schools were initiated by Betty Murray and her colleagues for the express purpose of developing leadership in the arts at the community level. These Schools of Community Arts, held between 1948 and the late 1960s, were staffed by leading Canadian artists and arts teachers, as well as by Division staff and other government workers. The Schools, located for many years in Betty's village of Tatamagouche, offered courses in choral and instrumental music, drama, dance, and visual arts. By the late 1950s, attendance reached a peak of 183 resident students, most of whom slept, ate, worked, and gave their performance in the regional High School.

The success of the Schools, as one might anticipate, led to more requests for arts services in the provinces. One was for a provincial festival that would allow students at the school to hear the very finest artists of the day and view community arts and crafts. Thus, in 1956, the NS Festival of the Arts came into being. Although Festival committee members represented a wide variety of artistic and business interests, Betty Murray was able to convince them all again that her village offered the ideal location. This, according to recollections of festival officials today, was not only because of the natural beauty of the village, but because of Murray's ability "in identifying people and having things happen in that community".

The Festival attracted over 7,000 visitors in its first year and, by 1959, numbers rose to 11,000, where they remained for the nine more years that the Festival stayed at Tatamagouche. All large arts performances were held in the High School and in a nearby church, while crafts-people demonstrated their work in a couple dozen large tents, erected in a community field in front of the school. The people of Nova Scotia were able to hear and see operas, plays, solo performers, and to learn about the crafts and folk arts of their own province by talking with the artists-at-work.

Just as the School of Community Arts led to the idea of a provincial festival, the combined successes of the schools and festivals persuaded Division staff toward the late 1950s that young people, too, would benefit from greater exposure to art, drama, and music. There were still only a few music teachers in the province and the delivery of the arts in the public schools continued to be sporadic. From its inception, the guiding purpose of the Junior School of the Arts was to develop leadership abilities in youth, both in their particular art interests and in aspects of community living.

Each of these arts initiatives flourished for about two decades until, gradually, they were replaced, first by shorter residential schools and, then, by training schools and more individualized forms of learning. In time, specialization began to play a role in arts organizations as well. The Festival of the Arts moved to Wolfville and then to Halifax, to better facilities and increased government funding. The people, however, did not respond to the loss of rural flavour; numbers fell off and, in a few years, the organization petered out. The senior School of Community Arts remained at Tatamagouche during Betty's time with the Division (i.e., until 1961) but, then, it too was discontinued. The Junior School, which had catered to a wide variety of artistic interests, gave way in the mid-1960s to specialized band, choral, piano, and string camps. The move from "community" to individual pursuits can be considered, in Habermasian terms, a commodification of the arts. As such, it marks their marginalization to the elite realms of society – a direction very much in evidence today. But, for many years, the arts were fundamentally important to community development.

Communicative and Emancipatory Action

It is evident that the adult educators of this story valued human dignity in economic, social, and cultural terms, and a reasonably just distribution of life's cultural and material goods. The impetus was modernist and humanist in its liberal belief in the possibility of progress with an additional motivating force, the social gospel message. This approach to one's fellow man, embedded within the "lifeworld" of the people, was simply *right*.

It was as a means to these goals of human advancement and justice that educators valued discursive and non-discursive modes of communication. In each school or short course, discussion groups adhered to certain rules of conduct--rules that Habermas would later outline as essential to "communicative action"--that speech acts be neither distorted nor repressive. Topics were to emanate from the discussants; they were to come from the people's own life-world. No individual was to dominate the discussion and each was to take a turn while the others listened. While listening may lead to confusion and uncertainty initially, "there is always hope when people ... listen to both sides; it is when they attend only to one that errors harden into prejudice" (J.S. Mill, in Garrison, 1996, p. 431). In terms of Habermas' triad of interests, this communication took place at a *practical* level. The arts provided another form of communication, both in their non-discursive forms of dance, painting, and music, and in their

discursive forms--drama, film, and literature. They allowed for a three-dimensionality of experience in that they challenged taken-for-granted ways of seeing and being in the world and, in so doing, they provided an "aesthetic shock" that propelled people to question everyday assumptions.

We can begin to think of three-dimensionality by considering its alternative. The one-dimensional person, according to Marcuse (1968), inhabits a world stripped of sentient perception and of moral deliberation. S/he is governed by a technological rationality that asks how the goals of the bureaucratic workplace can be brought about with maximum efficiency and effectiveness. Thoughts of morality, artistry, and human compassion become secondary, or are eclipsed altogether. In artistic terms, we meet the one-dimensional character as a plastic being, a stereotype of what could be fully human. A good poet or dramatist, therefore, is capable of presenting fully rounded characters who have something of timeless value to tell us about the human condition. The same can be said of the musician or visual artist who, through sound and sight, enlarges our life-worlds.

In the Nova Scotia schools and festivals, the arts were to enhance the residents' awareness (ethical and aesthetic, as well as technical) of other ways of knowing. Residents, in turn, were able to call on the arts to enliven and enrich their own communities. Drama, for instance, was used to explore people's everyday lives, and amateur actors (i.e., community members) were encouraged to present problems for general discussion, using symbolic devices such as metaphor, irony, humour, and pathos. Choral groups, in which people explored and expressed their cultural heritage, sprang up all over the province. The adult educators of this particular period shared a belief in the value of social justice and an acknowledgement that the arts played an important role in achieving this. Yet the arts did not fulfil a utilitarian function only. Betty Murray and the hundreds of people she reached through song came to love music for its own sake. The arts added beauty to a world crying out for sentient experience. Those of us involved in community renewal would do well to reflect upon the value of blending utility and beauty in the contemporary context.

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Endnote

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