Roundtable Submissions:

Spaces for Community Development: Lost and Found
A Round Table Discussion

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This roundtable will discuss the dialectic of repressed and reborn community development, and education for citizenship in community based agencies in Toronto. What new forms does social action take? Where are the new locations? What can we learn from our location on this contested periphery? Have we been so trapped by our ideological positions that we have not been able to recognize new and creative forms of community expression?

The spaces for community development are shrinking. Many community agencies only provide minimal support for active community participation in the planning, implementation and evaluation of agency programs. We are concerned about this loss of a more participatory style of engagement that includes participants as active partners with staff in the creation of programs. Time and again adult educators have shown that community members are empowered by involvement. Participation often creates a sense of ownership, belonging and political awareness. However the neo-liberal environment has severely curtailed the possibilities for community agencies to be actively involved in education for citizenship. These agencies are compelled to shift from a process orientation to an outcomes-based delivery model. Outcomes-based models are easier to "quantify" and are thought to be more accountable. An empowered citizenry is not a priority. A case in point is a certain shelter for abused women. It had a major portion of its funding withdrawn on the basis that it was unable to secure employment for its residents. All the other work the agency does to empower and prepare the residents is unrecognized, devalued and unfunded.

Needless to say this drives adult education for citizenship, advocacy and community development to the precarious margins of the agencies' time, space and priorities. We are facing an intensified culture of insecurity and an attendant compliance with regulatory processes that smother initiatives meant to empower people as citizens.

None the less, hopeful initiatives reappear constantly in varied forms in our communities. We can be encouraged by the efforts and struggles of marginalized people across the world. They don't just comply. They create something new. Valuable community projects may be shut down, but people regroup, relocate and reorganize in some new place and form.

An example of a new form of community development is the Toronto Dollar project. This volunteer-driven effort created a "local currency" (printed by the Canadian Bank Note Company) that circulates like "real money" in the St. Lawrence Neighbourhood in Toronto. Ten cents on every dollar spent goes to a community trust fund that supports neighbourhood projects. These projects emphasize services, programs for youth, and they create paid work for very low income people trying to survive. Uniquely, honouraria given (in Toronto Dollars) to people on social assistance, recognizing their volunteer work contributions to local community services,
are not considered "income" and are not subject to clawback by welfare. This arrangement is a product of the social imagination, commitment and political skill of the Toronto Dollar's volunteers.

Another example of community development in the Toronto area is the revitalization of an anti-poverty organization. It has been in operation for twenty-five years and has undergone several incarnations and near closure throughout its history. However, today, it has re-established itself in the community with renewed vigor and mission. From a nondescript office, the staff, volunteers and board members have reconnected with the community; a community which is very diverse in its ethnicity and very homogeneous in its poverty. The food bank, the most central service, has now become a place for members of the community to browse through newspapers, have a coffee, or have a hot meal. These meals are prepared by volunteers from the community, who may also be recipients of the services of the agency. A kitchen garden in a nearby community park has provided the opportunity for community members to grow what they like to eat, teach others to garden, and finally, take pride in their produce. The decisions as to what to grow, what to sell, what to cook, and how to work together are made by the citizens of this neighbourhood. We see in this agency many elements of effective community development and a strong possibility for social cohesion in hard times.

The third example focuses on a medium for community development, the internet. This medium has created a new form of social relations for our information age. How we obtain, share and respond to information has been radically altered by the increasing number of internet users and the improved capabilities of internet services. Applications of this medium for community development would include e-mail petitions, project development, strategy sessions, the sharing of community information and chat room discussions. As an example of a specific site, Greenpeace at <www.greenpeace.org> has created a website that includes both information and the opportunity to join their cyberactivist group. This group provides opportunities to participate in on-line discussions and to help with Greenpeace campaigns. Spaces for community development continue to be lost and found, in the ebb and flow of community life. Adult educators need to seek out these new spaces and foster their growth into new expressions of social action.