Adult Learning for Active Citizenship: Exploring Learning Pathways around Citizenship and Participation in Community Organizations and Governance

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Understanding what motivates adult to engage in various learning endeavours across the lifespan often involves tracing multiple complicated and interconnected factors. Both formal and informal educational contexts determine how individuals will be politically involved through different stages in their lives. In a current study on lifelong learning, citizenship, and participation in community-based organizations in Canada, the possibilities and challenges of developing a more networked approach towards governance to support an active and engaged citizenry is explored. This study is funded by the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) and builds on previously completed research around women's lifelong learning trajectories in adult and higher education in Canada funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, as well as a previous CCL study on life histories of women as active citizens. The findings reveal a complex meshwork of factors that shape decisions around participation in both formal and informal learning contexts to become "active citizens". Differing perspectives are explored around the role of government, community-based organizations (CBO's), and volunteer participation as these relate to governance. Critical discourses in citizenship are used to explore how localized factors are often influenced by the effects of globalization and neoliberalism.

Overview of Research Study

The study began with a content analysis of related academic literature and policy documents around citizenship, governance, and the significance of learning within community-based contexts. Six case studies of "grassroots" [initiated through citizen involvement] community-based organizations (CBO's) across Canada were conducted to examine citizen participation within communities, as well as interconnections between CBO's and government. The case studies involved personal interviews with two or three members of each organization, an examination of websites, annual reports, and other printed materials, and a site visit. In addition, interviews with "key informants" – individuals working in government, the policy sector, and the volunteer and funding sector were conducted in three different regions in Canada; the Western, Central, and Eastern provinces to provide insights into policies, practices and resources to foster active citizenship. The "grassroots" organizations selected were chosen to represent as broad and diverse types of community based organizations as possible, from different geographic areas, and they include a hospice in Chilliwack, British Columbia, an organization that supports individuals with disabilities in Calgary, Alberta, an immigrant association in Windsor, Ontario and a food back in Oakville, Ontario, and an Acadian (francophone) cooperative in Cheticamp, Nova Scotia as well as a local branch of Oxfam, in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The key informants were also from diverse geographic locations across Canada, and included politicians and policy makers at different levels of government as well as representatives from administrative positions in the volunteer and non-profit sector.

Interviews from both key informants and the community organization participants were transcribed and sent back to participants for review. An additional feedback loop was included in the study whereby a summary report of initial findings was circulated to participants for their

assessment. In addition, a workshop was conducted to provide additional feedback from other community groups to explore in greater depth the issues of active citizenship and participation in governance.

The Findings

Numerous pathways lead to citizen involvement in both community-based organizations and in governance. A personal crisis, such as a family member's illness or a personal disability, may lead to involvement with a particular community-based organization, such as a hospice or the Ability Foundation. One person said, *"I wouldn't be where I am if it weren't for volunteering after my accident."* Another participant said, *"I saw an ad in the paper, and my mother had just been diagnosed with dementia and I wanted to do something -- I didn't want to go to the Alzheimer's Society as that was too close to the issue and the hospice just intrigued me."* Transition points in life, such as a move to a new area or retirement may also spark an interest in volunteer involvement. One volunteer explained, *"as life progressed and my kids are now grown and we're in a position where I have retired now. I can spend more time doing volunteer work"*.

The nature of volunteer commitments seems to be changing because of stress around time commitments. Many citizens choose short-term, intermittent volunteer commitments, such as fundraising for a particular event to accommodate busy schedules. One participant said, *"I don't want to go to a meeting every Thursday or every month, but give me tickets and tell me to sit at a table and sell tickets or be an usher at a theatre …sure, I'll do that for that one night…or even for the weekend…but not on an ongoing basis."* One member of a different organization reflected on the volunteers that they had and explained, *"What attracts people to us verses a lot of places is we have a minimal commitment because if you're interested in volunteering for Computer Ability all we require is an hour a week. A lot of places…it's five hours a week. That's a big commitment when you're working fulltime or you're a student, or you're here on a visa and just want to do something for the community."*

Concerns were voiced by many participants about the difficulty in getting sufficient volunteers, and worries that volunteerism may be declining. One key informant explained

> *Everybody is struggling with this loss of volunteer participation…and I'm not sure what the problem is, and none of us really are sure. Why are communities and almost every non-profit group struggling to find volunteers or people to step forward? From churches …the declining participation rates in many of them, not all of them. Community associations…most of them but not all of them having trouble getting board members, people to come out and participate. …People don't seem to be as connected with issues…It's almost as if they're not engaged in public life or citizenship.*

Many people who do volunteer also choose to spend their time with activities that benefit people that they are closely connected to, such as coaching their children's sports teams, rather than assisting with organizations that serve the broader community.

The relationship between different CBO's varies, and is often tenuous because of the scarcity of resources, both in terms of recruiting volunteers and seeking government funding or engaging in fundraising events in the community. As one of the key informants explained, when it comes to allocating grants, *"it's a competitive process"*. Another key informant stated, *"There's a competition for dollars in the community for fundraising. There's only so many golf tournaments you can do."*

CBO's vary in their interest in government support and involvement. Short-term funding, involved paperwork, and lack of interest in supporting administrative capacities were some

concerns linked with dependency upon government financial support. A member of one organization explained, "*Funding, whenever you say funding, it's always a challenge. You always have this knot in the pit of your stomach because you never know from one year to the other how much money you're going to get…Because we're so dependant on funding we sometimes find ourselves always waiting …it's always till the last minute …We cannot plan beyond the year.*"

One organization, a food bank, decided to completely opt out of appealing to government for assistance. As one of the members noted dismissively, "*Well the government pretty much messes up a lot that they get involved with.*" Instead, they chose to go directly to the community for support.

Another was striving for financial independence by developing a social entrepreneurship model for service delivery. A participant explained, "*We wanted to just break out of that and, let's see, in those days, we were 100 percent dependent on traditional sources of income. Three years ago we were probably 60 percent dependent, today about 90, 92 percent of our revenues are self-generated.*" In a social entrepreneurship model, the organization is often still connected to government, but as an organization that provides needed services that the government contracts out.

Within Canada, a large number of community-based organizations remain almost completely dependent on government support. Often the focus on meeting short-term, localized goals, as well as dependency upon government assistance, meant that advocacy was not perceived to be a part of the mandate of many local CBO's.

This difficulties around sponsoring organization involved in advocacy work were noted by one key informant involved in the funding process:

> *we don't really fund something that would strictly be called lobbying or advocacy as defined by Revenue Canada and that presents a challenge for us, especially in the environmental sector, because a lot of what environmental groups do is … there are the ones that go plant trees; but a lot of them are there trying to lobby for the elimination of pesticides …Where does education stop and advocacy start? I don't know. So there's a fine line….*

From the perspective of the organizations, one person explained that [we] "*will not endorse one candidate or the other mainly because we are dependant on funding.* Time is also an important constraint. At the Multicultural Council, one person explained,

> *we would like to work with immigrant policymakers, or the Immigration Minister, and sometimes we have petitions and we have sent out letters, we have tried to link with various politicians on certain issues. But we haven't had the time to take it on as a regular board. It's been just too busy to do anything else….The staff is just completely overwhelmed. You talk to the staff and they don't have a single minute.*

Some members of organizations simply did not see that advocacy was part of their organization's mandate, often because they were too busy meeting localized needs at the grassroots level. One participant stated, "*our volunteers are not lobbyists. They're not interested in that.*" Engaging with government and policy might be seen as more appropriate, if the organization was linked with a larger network, for offices at the provincial level. For example, the hospice in Chiliwack explained that while their own role in terms advocating or lobbying on behalf of clients was limited, "*we do have a provincial organization, BC Hospice and Palliative Care, who do advocacy work for care of patients and families.*"

Participation in governance seems to be linked in some instances with active participation in CBO's, but often other factors (ie. keeping busy in retirement) were stronger motivators.

Decisions around participation were often linked with individualized motives and personal experiences rather than broader social objectives.

This was not true of all volunteers, however. Some individuals were conscious of the possibilities for political engagement through their work with community-based organizations. For example, a volunteer at Oxfam, suggests an alternative way of thinking about relationships between government and community-based organizations. He argues that,

My notion is that government is a good institution, at local, national, and international levels, and part of being a good institution is an obligation to engage in social policy such as poverty and social justice issues. So it is appropriate to engage in social policy and engage with community-based organizations for that purpose.

Analysis

Drawing upon a critical feminist analysis, it is clear that there are numerous ways in which adult learners determine their learning pathways around participation as citizens. Family, work, and community, as well as different expectations according to life stages all shape the types of involvement that individuals engage in and their participation in both formal learning and informal learning contexts (such as volunteer organizations and community groups).

Critical and feminist adult educators note the way in which neoliberalism is shaping discourses around learning and citizenship. Jarvis (2002) argues that within a neoliberal context there is a need for adults to understand the complexities of the broader global and social forces in order to participate fully as citizens. Oolsen (2006) and Teghtsoonian (2004) point out that the impact of neoliberalism can be seen in the way that factors that shape and differentiate individual experience are screened out of consideration, and competition for scarce resources is intensified. Lister (2003) argues that education for citizenship often addresses preparing students to become future workers rather than taking wider social and political concerns into consideration.

In terms of actual citizenship participation in the volunteer sector, the impact of neoliberalism can be seen in how it places greater emphasis on individual responsibility, competition, and the values of the marketplace. Within this climate, volunteerism may be eroded, and often becomes a fragmented and incidental activity. The identity of what it means to be an "active citizen" is often taken up differently by government, organizations, and individual Canadians. It is unclear whether many citizens become aware of broader social and political concerns through localized volunteer work, unless the organization has an advocacy mandate. Instead, the reasons for being engaged in volunteer work are often linked with personal reasons rather than an interest in political engagement.

At the same time, the effects of neoliberalism also impact upon grassroots types of organizations. CBO's must develop an assortment of strategies to survive within an increasingly difficult environment, ranging from reliance on government funding to social entrepreneurship. The intensification of competition erodes opportunities for cooperation, and the sense of uncertainty with a lack of core government funding for most organizations makes it difficult to engage in long term planning or visioning. While some individuals would like to see stronger linkages between government and grassroots organizations, and acknowledge the importance of advocacy around policy development, this does not seem to be a central focus for most CBO's. Unless, as in some instances, particular forums are set up to encourage dialogue between government, policy makers, and community-based organizations, there are few opportunities for these types of conversations to take place. In addition, there is a lot of fear that being too vocal or

critical may impact detrimentally upon funding for organizations that are primarily dependent upon the government for financial support.

As my previous research on women's lifelong learning trajectories and on women as active citizens indicates, gender is an important variable that shapes individual life courses. Women's lives often do not follow the same pathways as male lives. Yet with the increasing level of participation of women in the paid labour force, many women who often served as the mainstay of volunteer organizations are now pressed for time and unable to contribute the number of hours of labour that they did in the past. Women are still responsible for most of the unpaid labour in the home, and often have the same demands in the paid workplace. Although women often feel a strong sense of commitment to community, they may not be able to be as actively engaged as they would like because of these gendered expectations on their labour. As a consequence, they are more likely to make short-term commitments that involve fewer hours of work.

Lack of time seems to be a factor that impacts on both men and women in regards to citizenship participation. In the current neoliberal context, people are often driven to work extensive hours. This may undermine both the willingness and ability of people to contribute volunteer hours to the broader community and to become politically involved as "active citizens". Many of the people who do commit a large number of volunteer hours to grassroots organizations, unless the organization have a strong advocacy orientation, often seem to feel removed from the arena of governance and political decision making. This indicates that the notions of "active citizenship" may be taken up in a variety of ways. While many citizens may be willing to contribute a limited amount of time to supporting organizations in their community, this does not necessarily lead to engagement with the broader political sphere.

Implications of Research for Adult Educators and Policy Makers

Unlike our European and British counterparts (Martin, 2003; Lister, 2003) there has been limited empirical research around citizenship, governance, and lifelong learning within Canada. Initial results from this study indicate that creating a more networked approach towards governance is complicated by different organizational mandates, local interests, and effects of neoliberalism. While some individuals and organizations see advantages and benefits to creating partnerships and exploring opportunities for collaboration, all too often competition for scarce resources makes it difficult for organizations to establish close networks. The relationship with government is complicated by the issue of funding and concerns around whether this might be adversely affected if an organization becomes overtly engaged in advocacy. At the same time, the lack of time for many people is limiting their willingness to volunteer, particularly if the work involves a long term or time consuming commitment.

An aging and increasingly diverse population, as well as shifting economic, social, and cultural trends, impact upon citizen participation in communities and in governance. Understanding the learning journeys of "active citizens" requires a critical assessment of educational experiences connected to the homeplace, workplace, and community as well as considering personal learning experiences that may occur during individual life courses.

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