Learning Changes

COMMUNITY CONNECTION
OCCUPY, ORGANIZE, LEARN AND CHANGE

by Sharon Simpson

Since the first publication of this newsletter this page has been dedicated to providing information on anti-poverty work outside of the APCOL case studies. In this issue I would like to vary from that approach. In this season of widespread mobilization, I will use this as an opportunity to offer my personal comments on the Occupy Movement.

Inspired by the occupation of Egypt's Tahrir Square, Vancouver-based Adbusters called for the occupation of Wall Street in New York City. The call was answered by many and prompted occupations in cities across the globe. Initially the occupation of Wall Street did not garner much attention from traditional media. When they did provide coverage, often their coverage referred to the Occupy Movement as one that lacked clear messaging, leadership and coordination.

While new media has the ability to disseminate information at light speed, it is from traditional media that we continue to seek affirmation and legitimization. As such, when the Occupy Movement was depicted by traditional media as lacking in messaging, leadership and coordination it was easy to lose sight of the issues that galvanized people across the globe to take action.

It may be reasonable to say that the Occupy Movement does not have a single message, however it would be irresponsible to say that the movement does not have a clear message. Simply stated, the movement calls for equity in all areas where inequity is present. Others may replace the words equity and inequity with justice and injustice, but whatever the words, the concept remains the same. Inequitable access to resources has resulted in deepening the roots of poverty. The roots of poverty can be easily identified in areas where inequity is present.

The entrenchment of poverty across the globe is a result of inequitable access to basics such as food, housing, employment and education. This raises the question: how can organizing on a global scale address poverty issues and what lessons can be learned from the Occupy Movement? Questions of organizing and learning are central to the APCOL project. The Occupy Movement potentially offers new insight as to how people organize and learn based on a single overarching theme such as equity, while advancing their related but individual issues.

It may be argued that the infectious nature of the Occupy Movement has, to a small degree, shifted public discourse on the topic of equity. Traditional media have reported some of the affluent in society as saying the Occupy protesters have the right to protest. However, the conversation on how to honour the protesters' call for equity where there are inequities has not yet started. While it is not known what the end results of the movement will be, the movement may have given birth to a large scale method of challenging the status quo by learning new methods of organizing.

Sharon Simpson is Special Projects Coordinator for Labour Community Services, and community co-leader of the APCOL project. **z**

These methodological and educational principles – this approach to anti-oppression in anti-poverty organizing and learning – guided APCOL's Learning From Each Other Conference in June 2011. It did so in many different ways.

The organizing committee of the conference was made up of a diverse range of community leaders, representatives and residents as well as academic researchers. This committee came together to discover a way that the broader interests of communities across Toronto could be supported through conference design. The committee created a list of the best things that could support the community in engaging in anti-poverty action and change.

Facilitated by Sue Carter, the design process was truly remarkable. PAR and Popular Education principles not only supported this design, they were embedded within it. It was a design that would both raise and support participants in answering the questions:

Why do some people get involved in neighborhood groups working for change, and others don't?

What do people learn through their involvement – why do some stay involved, and others leave?

Who is excluded, included and how can challenging the layers of oppression that shape participation lead to new energies, new skill and learning, and above all new forms of anti-poverty work from the bottom-up?

Taking place at what has emerged as one of the homes of anti-poverty activism in Toronto – the FoodShare building on Croatia Street – the conference design involved a series of plenary sessions where all gathered together to discover broader perspectives and debates regarding anti-poverty tools, actions,

And, in our final closing session Winnie Ng, Social Justice Chair at Ryerson University, stressed the need for on-going partnership between university and community activists and again highlighted the importance of fully integrating an anti-oppression lens into the on-going analysis of APCOL research. These plenaries were co-facilitated by D'Arcy Martin and Israt Ahmed, both already deeply involved in the overall APCOL project.

But the plenary sessions were only the tip of the iceberg. The bulk of the conference was made of smaller group sessions including research workshops. In these, we did not simply hear about the findings from the APCOL city-wide survey on anti-poverty activism. Instead, people were actively interpreting the data, challenging the data, wondering why this question and not another, giving valuable direction to future information gathering for the purposes of informing activist development and action.

During the workshop we offered a three-part model for sustaining community action: relationship-building, learning from each other, and getting things done. Our approach to the data throughout was: 'What is the

- Making Research Useful: Understanding our communities better through organizing and research;

- Alternative Social Planning: How research is done in the community;

- APCOL Community-Based Researcher Forum.

PAR, Popular Education and Anti-Poverty Work

The APCOL Learning from Each Other Conference brought together over 130 community participants. Many of these people had little prior engagement with the APCOL project, much to our surprise. Based on PAR and Popular Education principles a fundamentally new form of "research output" emerged. Instead of reports gathering dust on a shelf, the research was finding its way into action.

The APCOL approach said that we have to do more than just gather information about the problems: we have to do something about them. And, in our view in trying to ro cue

SPOTLIGHT: DISCUSSING ACTIVIST LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT WITH JUDY DUNCAN

by Peter H. Sawchuk

Hot on the heels of the publication of *Global Grassroots: Perspectives on International Organizing* (Social Policy Press) as well as their recognition this year as one Toronto's leading activist organizations (Now Magazine, 2011), Peter Sawchuk sat down with Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) Toronto organizer Judy Duncan to discuss two issues: how social activists emerge generally, and how organizers develop in ACORN specifically. The following offers condensed excerpts from the conversation.

PS: So how did you become an activist and how does it relate to ACORN today?

JD: For me personally, some of it stems from my experience in university, and even younger than that when I was in elementary school. [...] But the main thing is that after graduate school, I went to Seattle and saw this position with ACORN that I applied for. Today I would not describe myself as an activist. I would describe myself as an organizer. You know the difference is it's not about me being engaged, it's about other people being engaged and me helping to organize, and this shift happened when I started with ACORN. Most importantly, I realized wherever you go people really want to be engaged, but it's just that they're not exposed to the possible channels to get there.

PS: So, what are these types of channels?

JD: Well, people often see their situation compared to other people, and when they do they generally can get a bit mad. They see
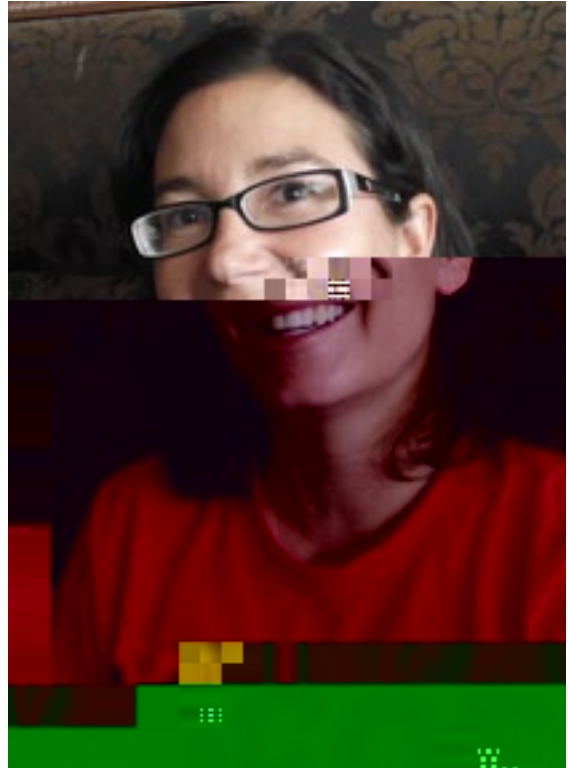

Photo courtesy of Peter Sawchuk

that they're not being valued as much as say someone making more money or something, and the channel that comes out of ACORN's work is, you know, you're standing at somebody's door or sitting on their couch in our door-to-door work, and you ask them, 'Are you interested in getting involved?' And they say, 'Yes'.

So, then it becomes getting them to come to meetings. But it has to be certain types of meetings because a lot of people might go to a meeting somewhere and they find it's actually dis-empowering. It's because they feel it's not going to go anywhere. So it's really important to show them examples of change and people actually making a difference.

PS: Why is it that people might not show up to a meeting though?

JD: Low and moderate income people are just busier with necessities compared to more affluent people. They're working two jobs. Their kids are getting into trouble because they can't be around as much as they'd like to be. Lots of things make life really busy. And then again, it's easier to watch television than to walk into a meeting full of people you don't know. So, you could maybe call it shyness or maybe just basic social nervousness.

PS: Well, that's not an issue we really talk about a lot in terms of organizing.

JD: I don't know if those terms capture it just right, but nobody really likes going to a meeting where they don't know anybody. So that's another important thing for these effective channels for action and participation.

PS: In terms of present day ACORN, do you think it pays enough attention to organizer/activist learning and development? Some anti-poverty organizations seem to pay a lot of attention to this while other great organizations seem to pay very little attention to it. What's ACORN like in these terms?

JD: It's the core of what we do. We call it leadership development. Everything we do is geared toward developing leaders. We work with them to develop a specific campaign and that's how learning happens. Everything we do is getting people to go door-to-door and develop leaders in a community.

PS: How about for staff organizers?

JD: We try to develop staff so they can develop community leaders. We have staff development materials. Our whole model is hinged on having good organizers who can develop leaders, so yes we spend a lot of time on training the organizers.

PS: So ACORN really revolves a lot around activist learning: learning in terms of building community leaders, and learning in terms of staff organizers. Specifically, how do you help the staff organizers do what they do?

JD: Our office looks pretty casual and campaign oriented, but our organization has a very structured set of things we take people through. They have to learn to door-knock effectively, they have to learn the rap. The rap takes two weeks or so to learn, to understand it and be able to execute it. There's five phases of the rap and we'll train people day after day, you know 2 or 3 hours a day. They learn by doing and shadowing. They'll go out and do it with another staff member who knows how to do it. It's all about how to engage people. It's all about asking questions. They do role play as well. It's very structured.

But we have to make sure in the course of this training that there's a good fit, that the person knows what they are in for, that they'll be going out to meetings and working with people in the community. We spend a lot of time working with new organizers. **z**

More information at **http://www.acorncanada.org**

Social, economic and political issues faced in one part of the world may not be exactly the same as those faced in another, but they can certainly be very similar.

This spring I had the opportunity to spend a few months in Hamburg, Germany on a graduate study tour and internship supported by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). I spent the first two weeks with twelve Canadian graduate students, meeting with academics, politicians and activists.

When the other students left, I settled into an internship at Haus der Jugend (Youth Centre) Wilhelmsburg, a child- and youth-serving organization in the south of the city, and set to learning about the issues and challenges facing neighbourhood residents.

Wilhelmsburg is the largest of a cluster of islands in the Elbe river, part of the city-state of Hamburg, and yet removed from it in material and symbolic ways. Connected by bridges, tunnels, public transit and public administration, Wilhelmsburg is distanced from other parts of Hamburg through its characterization as a "problem area," a racialized space of low incomes and discontent.

subsidized through the Hamburg system of
affordable housing, and landlords' level of

More and more, we see research partnerships developing between academics and community organizations. These can be enlightening and mutually beneficial collaborations which help us to create a better society together. However, in my experience, there are many problems that need to be addressed before we can develop research projects that have positive, long-

for discussion to help clarify the meaning of words. It is important for researchers to employ qualified translation services when working with different segments of immigrant communities.

We understand that there are often very

wanted to have more of a say in what was being researched, how it would be researched and most importantly, how the research would be used to benefit our communities in the short and long term.

We decided to better position ourselves for future research partnerships with academics, given that we did not have the capacity to lead such projects. To do this, we needed to decide the circumstances under which we would partner on a research project. This involved determining research questions that would be relevant to our mission and beneficial to the community, the support we could offer a researcher, and our expectations for results.

To create a list of potential research questions, we organized a meeting of community members to discuss issues our community was facing. Participants were involved in 20 minute discussions in 3 different topic areas. They were tasked with thinking about issues that affected the community and information gaps within the community that could be used to develop effective research questions.

A review of our internal capacity, notes from community discussions, as well as discussions with students and professors in academia about their needs culminated in a Research Agenda and Partnerships document that was circulated by e-mail and is also available on our web site: **http://ccnctoronto.ca/?q=node/394.** We continue to build our relationship with academics so that we may better understand each other's needs and capacity. We hope that this will attract students, academics and community researchers who are interested in building equitable partnerships and working towards making social change together.

Karen Sun is a John Bousfield Distinguished Visitor in Planning at the University of Toronto. She was the Executive Director of the Chinese Canadian National Council Toronto Chapter for the past five years and a proud member of the APCOL Steering Committee. In 2010, Karen ran for Toronto City Council. She continues to explore opportunities for community and academic collaboration. **z**

FILLING THE GAPS THROUGH STORYTELLING: HUMAN GEOGRAPHY AND SOCIAL BELONGING

by Doreen Fumia

People have stories to tell, stories about their lives, where they live and whether or not they feel like they belong. Belonging can reflect a variety of feelings such as a sense that you have a place in your home, your school, your community, your neighbourhood or your nation. Why does this matter and what does it have to do with anti-poverty community organizing and learning?

Quantitative methods seek to gather statistical information while qualitative methods seek to include background information to those statistical numbers. Our APCOL case study uses qualitative research. This includes historical and political backgrounds that shape social interactions and social inequality (for example, histories of racism or homophobia).

Shaping Neighbourhoods

There are many influences that go into shaping a neighbourhood and some include economic, political, and social events. For example, what were the conditions for a neighbourhood to take shape? Was it a factory that employed immigrants who fled Ireland during the Great Potato Famine in the 1800s? Was it originally a vacation spot or an area that was developed near waterway transportation?

What brought people to a place, what keeps them there and what drives them out? Were they born there? Did they migrate from another part of the city or another country? Is the place safer - or less safe - because of their race or sexual orientation? Or, are they there because it is the only place they could find affordable housing? How does this information reflect the experience that individuals have and how do these experiences shape neighbourhoods and stories about who belongs where?

Social inequality is a complex and often disturbing issue. If we look at Toronto and its over 140 neighbourhoods, we begin to understand how the city and local communities work hard to develop a sense

To summarize, this research will portray one neighbourhood as the residents experience it. We integrate these stories with information about the history, economic underpinnings and social networks that have helped make this space a neighbourhood. We follow one anti-poverty campaign run by the residents. In order to allow the residents to tell their own stories we will meet and tape our conversations. We will also walk the neighbourhood with residents, attend meetings and include photographs as a way to amplify their stories.

People tell complex and often contradictory stories which in turn demonstrate that paying attention to human geography creates dynamic and rich social histories about the places where we live. Working with residents to turn this rich social account about their neighbourhood into reports, local newsletters and policy recommendations serves to supplement community efforts to make living conditions better.

When residents work together on

Ford is trying to ignore these realities and focus only on the fact that municipal child care centres cost more to operate, and he tries to link this to the fact that staff are unionized and have better than average wages and benefits. He argues that the city could offer more spaces to more parents by shutting down these programs and spreading the money across lower cost programs.

This argument will be attractive to opponents of social spending, for-profit operators and even to people in the non-profit sector who are in desperate need of additional funding for their centres.

There are two problems with these arguments. The first is, what kind of services, if any, will low income families get when their municipal child care centre closes?

There is a relationship between what a program costs and the quality of care it provides. This is especially true when it comes to staffing. Study after study shows that the quality of care is directly related to staff wages and benefits. This is because programs with poorly paid staff have high turnover, staff are less experienced, and they are more likely to be holding down a second job.

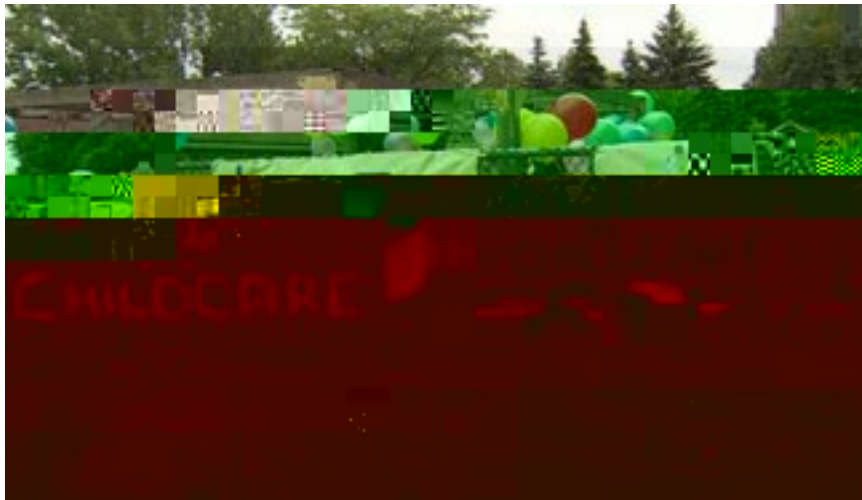If municipal centres close, non-profit community child care centres will not be able to absorb a whole lot of these low-income parents because they rely on a balance of full fee paying parents and subsidized parents in order to run their quality programs. Nor will they be in a position to take on additional children with special needs. This means that for-profit community operators will take some of these children, while others (e.g. children with complex special needs) will end up with no child care program at all.

For-profit operators are able to provide cheap spaces because they are willing to operate lower quality child care by slashing staff wages and benefits. This means that low-income children and their families will be getting cheaper child care that is less likely to meet their needs, and that has questionable child development benefits.

The second problem, is that Ford's rationale of more but cheaper child care won't stop with municipal child care centres. After all, if expensive municipal centres can be shut down and their funding re-allocated,

why can't more expensive, high quality non-profit programs be treated the same way?

Pushing for cheaper and cheaper child care leads to none of the child development benefits linked to higher rates of success in learning and better socialization. At a certain point, promoting cheap child care becomes

Our little project has grown up now, and needs to take on some wider responsibilities.

When a small group of community leaders and u n i v e r s i t y r e s e a r c h e r s started this project, our first concern was to build a strong foundation. On the community side, this meant demonstrating an ability to deliver useful results and to provide direct support to the capacity of grassroots groups.

APCOL At Large: Journey of Learning

by Joseph E. Sawan
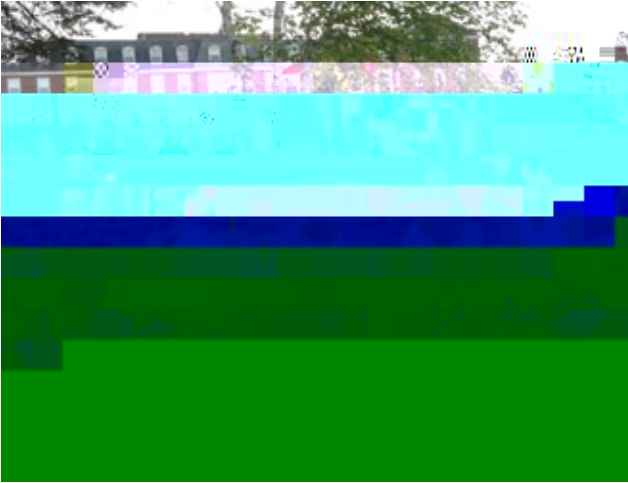
Shabnam Meraj, Ashleigh Dalton, Fazilatun Nessa Babli, Melissa Strowger Abbey and Joseph Sawan in Fredericton, New Brunswick. Photo courtesy of Tashnim Khan

One week before the APCOL Conference, a group of OISE graduate students and APCOL community researchers travelled to Fredericton, New Brunswick to share preliminary research in two conferences at the Canadian Federation of Humanities and Social Sciences Congress.

For most of us, this was a new experience; all of us had yet to present the APCOL findings outside of OISE or the communities where we live. We presented a total of six academic papers; three at the Canadian Sociological Association (CSA) and three at the Association for Nonprofit and Social Economy Research (ANSER). Each paper was co-authored by a graduate student and community researcher.

There was great interest in the learning processes described by community researchers, as Fazilatun Nessa Babli explained during her presentation at the ANSER panel; "What we learned? How we learned? The answers to these questions is during the Journey of Learning ... I got the opportunity to learn a lot about popular education, informal learning – skill development and surveying techniques/methods."

Although the 'journey of learning' described refers to past experiences of conducting research, it's clear that after struggling to analyse and present our research in Fredericton, we continue on this journey to reflect, learn and facilitate positive social change in the communities where we live.

Keeping in Touch

Members of the APCOL project are committed to communicating with groups and individuals interested in issues and campaigns involving Nutrition and Food Security, Housing, School Completion, and Jobs/Living Wages. If you would like to be part of this exchange of information please email us at info@apcol.ca and we will add you to our electronic listserv.