

Anti Poverty Community Organizing and Learning (APCOL)

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The Anti-Poverty Community Organizing and Learning (APCOL) project represents a partnership effort across several post-secondary institutions and a range of community-based groups in Toronto (Canada). This project was funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, under its Community University Research Alliance program (2009-2014). Drawing on carefully designed survey and case study methods as well as a participatory action research orientation - the aim of this research project has been to offer the most intensive study of activist learning and development in anti-poverty work in Canada.

The co-editors are pleased to present its official working paper series. The publications contained in this series are linked to

Promoting Holistic Community Organizing: FoodShare Food Activist Workshop Series

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Abstract: This paper discusses the activities and outcomes related to the APCOL Case Study with FoodShare. The focus of this case study was the development of FoodShare Food Activist Workshops to support intervention by activists on food security issues in the City of Toronto to expand participation. Description of the development of the food activist network of community leaders is provided. Specifically, the content of these specially designed workshops is seen to be informed by the challenges and successes Food Activists have faced with the goal of strengthening the capacity of community members to start, sustain, and create a better environment for projects such as community gardens, markets and kitchens. In parallel with this the paper speaks to

PROMOTING HOLISTIC COMMUNITY ORGANIZING: FOODSHARE FOOD ACTIVIST WORKSHOP SERIES

INTRODUCTION

I walk with a sense of anticipation toward the school where FoodShare is housed. Walking on the path to the front door through the footprint garden I feel alive. There are too few opportunities to walk on the earth in my urban life. Inside, I pass the kitchen and connect with a buzz of activity. The student interns are huddled making a game plan for the lunch preparations that will soon be underway. Entering the building further, I pass the cafeteria already set up for the French immersion students' lunch. Elsewhere in the building, produce is being delivered and sorted for the Good Food Boxes that will be distributed throughout the city; staff members are working with community leaders to plan their community gardens and markets. In other corners of the school, staff are leading student nutrition programs and working on advocacy campaigns for social assistance reform and related food issues. I arrive at the classroom where I meet with the Food Activists each week. I am in the hive of activity now.

The FoodShare Food Activist group made an important contribution to food activism through networking community leaders active on food issues across the Greater Toronto Area and developing workshops that would expand the number of community members active on food issues. I was honoured to participate in the process as a Graduate Assistant member of the team from OISE/University of Toronto. In this article, I will quote at length in order to share the Food Activists stories, experiences and reflections of the FoodShare Food Activist group.

FOODSHARE AND THE ANTI-POVERTY COMMUNITY ORGANIZING AND LEARNING PROJECT (APCOL)

The Food Activist group's home was at FoodShare. FoodShare is a hub of food activism, which "tries to take a multi-faceted, innovative and long-term approach to hunger and food issues. Its projects are based on the principles of self-help and community building" in order to "address short-term issues of household hunger, while

shifts during the course of designing the workshops, and they were revised over and over in an effort to get them right. The Food Activists wanted to present a new way of thinking to workshop participants, while still connecting with them where they were at.

ENGAGEMENT WORKSHOP

For example, Austin's workshop on engagement went through many changes as it was being developed. Austin is a Food Activist with a strong connection with food and gardening. He learned an appreciation of food from his mother and from friends in his Toronto Community Housing building. Currently, he organizes the building's Community Garden. One of his concerns is the disappearance of farm land. He feels that hunger is a central issue and that food banks should offer healthy, nutritious food.

Austin's Engagement workshop was initially

Austin reflected (April 27, 2010):

That seed will self seed and it will continue to grow. It is hoped that you as a workshop participant will go out into your community and be that flower and you will continue to touch people and you will inspire them, and they in turn will inspire others.

You are not forcing them to do anything. But to be really inspired by the work you do, how you do it, how you feel about it. And connecting with me, because I remember connecting with others around activism and it feels good.

The ideas that food activism connects individuals and communities were a motivating force throughout the entire project.

and provided an empty space for participants to give input and connect. One of the activities was called “shaping our hearts.” Sarosh described the process, as she said (April 27, 2010):

In this activity, participants create a heart out of clay, put their good intentions into it and think about what their heart brings to a community. They shape that heart and sit with it for awhile, and then it gets passed to the next person who gets to sit with it for awhile. The heart is passed all the way around the circle, and, when it gets back to you, it feels different. And also, because you spend so much time creating your heart and thinking about it, you have a certain respect for other people’s hearts. So, that was very moving. When we did the pilot with the group, comments came back in the evaluation from the group. At the end people wrote things like “transformative.” There were so many aspects to it, tenderness, being touched by everyone in your co

would do in their communities to make peace a reality. Reflecting on the activity, Vandana said, “I recognized the needs of participants and need to connect them to the benefit of all. I found it quite mind opening to me. That gift, to give people a new energy to be involved” (April 27, 2010). In order to unite as a group, members had to “create a deeper space to connect at a heart level. It was a moment for a kind of slowing down, opening, listening, and breathing: to understand the big picture. This will give people new energy to be involved” (April 27, 2010). Part of this involved activities to slow down and connect to oneself and the group. Vandana calls these “mellow-izers,” in contrast to the usual energizers used in a workshop process to pick up the pace.

She reported being happy to have the courage to offer this workshop and was pleased it was well received by the group. Vandana shared (April 27, 2010):

The voice over the loud speaker announces our time to go for lunch. We excitedly leave our classroom and join the serving line with FoodShare community animators who have returned from leading grassroots education programs in different parts of the city, youth from the Native School in the same building, the food packers and administrative staff. This is always a chance to meet and chat with others in the building. As usual, it is a great selection of yummy, healthy food, with lots of vegetarian and vegan selections. We gather around a table in silence as we enjoy the food. As our hunger is satisfied, we continue discussing issues or share humorous personal stories.

OUR REFLECTIONS

At the end of the process, we reflected on what had taken place for us as a group. In this reflection exercise, I asked: as a FoodShare Food Activist, what did you learn or feel about yourself? Working as a group? Community organizing? Food activism? Workshop design and facilitation? What else took place that was important for you?

Many learnings and reflections came out of this exercise. The Food Activists noted the strength of working together and overcoming the fear of doing things differently. Several of the concrete learnings included becoming receptive to diverse approaches and visions when working in a group, the importance of listening and how styles of leadership impact the group. They also appreciated learning about new tools and ways to run workshops, such as different approaches to storytelling. While initially the Food Activists said they felt overwhelmed by the learning curve, they gradually felt more confidence in problem solving. Overwhelmingly, the Food Activists spoke about feeling empathy, connection and a willingness to share with others in the group.

The Food Activists also commented on logistical issues, such as appreciating the pay, the need for clear expectations and details prior to taking part, as well as frustration at losing momentum during the sometimes long breaks between meetings. They also mentioned the difference that Sarosh's encouragement made along the way. The group appreciated her gifts of insight, patience and understanding. The way in which she drew

on the resources of the group members, developed ideas along with them and helped to take these ideas further was also invaluable.

KEY LEARNINGS: DIFFERENT WAYS OF ENGAGING IN COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

Of these many learnings, there was one theme that stood out for me, which was the emphasis on the processes by which we engage in community organizing. The Food Activists spoke in detail about how they gained an appreciation for nurturing the connection between people while undertaking food security activism. They also reflected on how the group's process enforced the importance of honouring people's feelings in community organizing.

FOCUS ON PERSONALLY CONNECTING IN ORGANIZING

Many Food Activists mentioned they had learned the value of deeply knowing and understanding the people with whom they were organizing, as opposed to being driven to immediate action without an understanding of where others in the group are coming from and what their motivations are. One way that we gained an understanding of others in the Food Activist group was through the "streams of experience" activity. Group members found this experience to be a profound shift away from organizing from a strictly intellectual place.

Nabila spoke to this important shift in ways of organizing. Nabila is rooted in food activism through her family who originated from the Caribbean where they had an organic farm. Her mother and her

day she will have to fight for food. She stated, “Food is a right not a privilege...it should be free” (April 27, 2010).

To illustrate the importance of honouring feelings in community organizing, Nabila shared (April 27, 2010):

The (streams) activity showed the challenges and “triggers” in our experiences – we can see what it was that brought us to this day. This is necessary to move further into activism, to working in unison so that we can have an optimal effect.

I see it as necessary in moving forward in my journey as an activist, because I know if I have a group, or my board of directors or my steering committee, I would want us to be moving from that united level, where we understand what brought us here. And I see that in a lot of organizations that is lacking [...]

Right now, we have a board of directors for our school, and a lot of times putting that kind of thing together, you do it more from an intellectual - you know, you want to have people who carry weight in the community (laughs), who have certain educational background. And if I had to restructure it, I would do it based on what has brought them to this point, what have their experiences been. [...] And, to me, that is a better example. Because you know you can have a band load of education – Masters, PhDs everywhere – but you have no experience, no *real* life experience and no emotional connectedness. And if you’re not connected emotionally and if you’re not connected through drive and wanting to do something then it is really not beneficial to community organizing, it is more for personal (reasons). A lot of time, I’ve witnessed, or I have sat on boards with, people who are more personally driven. And there’s a personal agenda where it has to be a collective and a community agenda.

So, now we are developing a new organization, and I have used a lot of what we have done here to develop that steering committee and the work. Even in choosing the staff. We have gone in a

and she worked at a radio station as a way to voice her truth. While she organizes around food issues, Fatima stressed she is not a gardener. “I was not a person with a green thumb. My mother would plant something, and, if I touched it, it died.” Instead, Fatima wanted to work with people and encourage them to see the best in one another, rather than blaming each other for problems that exist.

As an example of honouring people’s feelings in organizing Fatima said (personal communication, April 27, 2010):

From this group I got the experience of “feeling” connections. [...] This whole group opened different aspects for me. How to be an organizer that “feels” people but at the same time makes sure things are running smoothly. I can give you one example. In my community, they are trying to organize a meeting. We have a huge community, and it is very diverse. And they are trying to organize around the culture and divisions between different ethnic groups; they are trying to organize a workshop to connect people. And they called me to participate in it. Right away the things I learned here, I showed a lot of it there. The organizer who did it, she was so concrete and not taking into consideration the feelings and cultures. And I was like, “This is *all* wrong.” I just said, “You are doing it at the wrong level. You are not taking into consideration that people are really coming from different backgrounds. You are coming just with what you want to put in your report and numbers. But the community out there is moving totally in a different direction. People are searching for different things from what you are bringing and you have to change it.” And I learned all of it from this group. [...]

I introduced some tools to them that we learned here; some ways for knowing people. [...] I said “let them tell their story. Why are you talking about Afghanistan in terms of Taliban and all that? Let’s refocus. You want to connect, let’s ask them - the people

from our community - to tell their stories. They have wonderful stories if you really want to know the Afghanistan community.”

And they were like, “Wow this is really good.” [...] They were confused about what I was telling them but they asked me to organize something with them for next year. [...] They were so confused and open to that at the same time, and I think it was very good. You can organize in different ways.

Women-centered organizers have argued for decades that feelings and spiritual connectedness must be made central in learning processes (Boler, 1999; Fernandez, 2003, Horsman, 1999). These ideas are also integral to the food movement, which by its very nature is nurturing, earth-centered and holistic. In direct contrast to many other movements and social justice organizing spaces, the food movement focuses on the whole person and honours his or her feelings and personal story. The focus in these other processes is on mobilizing resources or devising a strategy, as opposed to on valuing the unique drives and passions of the activists and community members who are deeply connected and committed to the issues. It is an irony in organizing that we can reproduce the very dehumanizing systems we struggle against!

Storytelling is one way around this tendency. Stories evoke our feelings and help us connect to our common experiences. We spoke at length as a group about the power of stories and how to facilitate storytelling. We also spoke about ways to provoke community members to think about their stories through having them focus on objects, art or music as a way to answer the question: “Where are you today?” These objects or art forms can be used in a show-and-tell process, where communities members can think about what the object or art piece evokes for them and share as much as they are comfortable sharing. We also spoke about going back to powerful memories as a way to construct our personal stories.

In general, the workshops were empowering and allowed the Food Activist group to explore new terrain. Austin noted that many of the workshops were inspired by the “Awakening the Dreamer: Changing the Dream Symposium”³ experience. He said he “felt empowered to have the ability to go ahead. But initially it felt like, “Oh my God!”

Sarosh echoed this as she said (personal communication, April 27, 2010):

It feels risky to me. I feel like I am stepping out of animator comfort zone. I do have some anticipation that participants will be, “What is this new age-y stuff?”

This is where there can be psychological complexity of designing a workshop. We had a glimpse of what goes into it, by people that have done a lot of work in the area. So we had something to model on, from those who have a lot of experience. For me, at least, it was my first experience of a workshop that was very psychologically defined. It was much finessed that way. So it brought in other things that we could use, a lot of reflective moments were built in. We tend to typically have a lot of higher paced workshops. We move from thing to thing quickly. I feel like the shift we went through was giving it psychological depth, giving it time

powerful. Underlying issues come to the surface. It can be more powerful than answers.

CONCLUSION

Through the process of coming to know one another, exploring issues related to the food movement and designing and piloting the workshop series with the group, the Food Activist group worked towards strengthening the food movement. We showed courage to look at and do things differently and challenged others to do the same as we shared our work. We did this through reconnecting to our conviction to be active in ways that are nurturing and holistic and through renewing our collective strength through the powerful energy of the group.

The work of activists of all kinds needs time for pause and reflection, time for regeneration along the path. As a member of the group, I witnessed a blooming and regeneration as the Food Activist group had the opportunity to come together through FoodShare and the APCOL project.

Returning home through the foot print garden, I feel a sense of satisfaction. I am fulfilled by the richness of the day. We are now resources to one another now and a strong force as a result.

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Christine McKenzie is a student, popular educator and activist living in Toronto. As a popular educator and activist, Christine has trained trainer and facilitated popular education processes and community-based research in Canada and Latin America over the past 15 year. She is currently pursuing her Ph.D. in Adult Education and Community Development in the department of Adult Education and Counselling Psychology at OISE/University of Toronto, where her research focuses on women's critical feminist learning in community based education programs.