THE COMMUNAL ‘WE’? A Conversation Piece on the Richness of Being a Network

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WALL Working Paper No.15, 2000
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document was written at the request of the Steering Committee of the Network for New Approaches to Lifelong Learning (NALL). It is intended to articulate the richness of academics and their community/union partners working in an SSHRC-funded network, especially the cross-over between NALL’s core groups and projects. It is written to focus on the Network’s core debates of the past four years. There are five.

1. Creating spaces in which to work against the typical social relations of academia.

Large and inter-disciplinary, NALL represents an opportunity for its members to work across differences in language and concepts, theory and practice as well as policy questions. In spite of the inherent complexities, principal investigators indicated that collaboration has been the best part of their participation. The Network was perceived as a way to break down (at least temporarily) the kinds of separations that are characteristic of academic work/life. That said, research teams were often limited to traditional academic/student combinations. The intermediate (1-6) groupings were difficult to orchestrate, and depended heavily on the time and initiative of decentralized leaders. Most difficulties with the Network as a whole pertained to money (not enough), and reporting (far too much). Difficulties were most effectively dealt with through face to face meetings (e.g. annual conferences) while email facilitated day to day “business.”

2. Furthering collaborative relationships between academics, labor and community groups/organizations outside of university and other institutional settings.

The Network’s community partners (as collaborators and research sites) include co-ops, unions, corporate and community organizations. Unions predominate within this category. With their history of union/worker/labor education, they are better understood as learning environments and producers of knowledge than are community organizations. However, both force researchers to attend to the needs and priorities of people outside universities, including writing and representing issues in terms other than those valued by academic journals and textbooks. NALL researchers have been challenged by the demands of their sites, by the unsettling process and unexpected outcomes of the university/community relationship. Members have also had to defend a commitment to participatory action research principles and methods against an SSHRC critique that they undermined the development of “rigorous systematic research.”

3. Making ‘common sense’ of informal learning using divergent methods

NALL members responded differentially to the conceptual framework established by “NALL Central” in both fleeting (e-mail) and focused ways (annotated bibliography, core readings). Although this characterization is somewhat polarized, some went out and “discovered” informal learning as it exists “out there” while others saw themselves as...
“constructing” informal learning conceptually as a function of academic practice. Some built on the existing literature while others “read against” it. Only some of this tension is methodological. A question the Network now faces is whether it is possible to integrate or make “common sense” out of results generated from different sites, standpoints and methods. If not, what are the alternatives for presenting what we have learned?

4. Clarifying, augmenting and/or challenging the dominant definition of informal learning.

Network members have been successful in exploring the nature and extent of informal learning with new actors and organizational environments. Potentially rich, their work puts serious pressure on existing definitions in a field already troubled by boundary problems. One of the biggest challenges comes from First Nations/Aboriginal communities in which the existing conceptualization is actually reversed. Other projects make a case for “seamless: informal learning, one that recognizes the tacit qualities of the process and the various ways it is embedded in daily life (including formal education). Network researchers continue to struggle with the relationship between learning and experience, perhaps especially between learning and collective (social/political) experience and interaction.

5. Formulating strategies that would appropriately address the tendency of dominant groups and discourses to regulate and appropriate informal knowledge.

NALL is characterized by ongoing debates over formal/institutional “recognition.” The primary tension is between members who view informal learning as a powerful strategy for validation of untapped or de-legitimized knowledge, and members who view it as a way of regulating and appropriating this knowledge. PLAR is the most specific programmatic example of recognition. Some researchers call for its equivalent in their particular setting. Others are concerned with practices of governance, for example, with the ways that individuals (informally) learn to take responsibility for re/making and regulating their own conduct. Invoked here are complex relations of power/knowledge, as well as the contradictions of “empowerment.”

Thus, we arrive at the theme for the October 2000 NALL conference: Contested Terrain: The boundaries and practical impact of informal learning. Through this document, a background reading for that event, I hope that the general areas for debate and possibilities for action (research, program, policy) have become more clear.

Introduction

In December 1999, the Network for New Approaches to Lifelong Learning (NALL) received its mid-term evaluation report from the site visit committee for the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). The committee found that NALL showed great potential as a model for researchers working in a network relationship. It recommended funding maintenance through to the end of the grant
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period. At the same time, reviewers were concerned about certain “weaknesses,” most of which reflected their desire for better “integration” of the Network.

Although it took a different view, the NALL Steering Committee agreed that it would be wise if someone fleshed out the depth of the work that has been done across NALL’s six groups over the past few years. Members wanted to understand the dimensions of cross-over between groups and especially to highlight learning within/across different populations. Related to this was the need to identify and articulate the richness of working as a network. What do we know because we are/have been more than isolated projects? What more can we say as a result? Members of the Steering Committee felt it important to capture findings that were not anticipated and surprises that arose out of participation at both project and more collective levels.

I took on the task of addressing at least some of these questions and concerns. I’ll tell you straight out that I thought my chances of becoming the “goat” on this one were pretty high. As I have experienced it, the Network is a complex, often elusive and shifting construction. When I started out, I had only a passing familiarity with the literature that shaped its activities and sometimes found the debates obscure. However, I reasoned, if a woman of intelligence and good will can’t make some sense out of NALL’s materials and its emergent conversation, there are problems here that are considerably larger than my ego. And this, the Steering Committee would want to know.

In the final chapter of his book The Corrosion of Character, sociologist Richard Sennett argues for a view of community as a space where people “are bound together more by verbal conflict than by verbal agreement, at least immediate agreement. This view of the communal ‘we’ is far deeper than the often superficial sharing of common values such as appears in modern communitarianism.” He goes on to argue that “there is no community until differences are acknowledged within it.” And he references the view of political scientists Gutmann and Thompson that “the evolving expression of disagreement is taken to bind people more than the sheer declaration of ‘correct’ principles. … The sociologists of dispute and confrontation do not believe sustained verbal conflict is uncivilized; instead it forms a more realistic basis for the connections between people of unequal power or with differing interests” (Sennett, 1998:143).

I have found this perspective useful in writing this document. The more I have worked with material from the Network, the less able I have become to represent it in any simple way. In my own mind, I have shifted from thinking about “cross-links” to thinking about core debates. As Sheila Neysmith notes in Restructuring Caring Labour, for feminist scholars who constituted the Caring Network, the “process and change that we all underwent was instructive in underlining the importance of debate to developing an analysis. Analysis does not occur in isolation”(2000: 3).

My focus is on those four or five places where NALL’s conversations over the past few years have coalesced. They include our struggles to:
Create spaces in which to work against the typical social relations of academic work;

Maintain and extend collaborative working relationships between academics, labor and community groups/organizations outside of university and other institutional settings;

Make “common sense” of informal learning using divergent methods;

Clarify, augment or challenge the dominant definition of informal learning;

Formulate strategies that would appropriately address the tendency of dominant groups and discourses to regulate and appropriate informal knowledge.

Although not necessarily places of agreement or commonality, these are powerful places in the life of the Network and for its potential to contribute to a variety of publics.

The limitations of this document are many. The most pronounced are the limits of my source materials and on my time to better understand the extent and nature of our collective research. I deal to some extent with conceptual issues but this is not a document about “theoretical foundations.” I pay particular attention to the small case studies primarily because they are the most latent piece of NALL’s work. Unfortunately, as I write, some of these projects are still in the data-gathering and analysis stages; I have a limited sense of their emergent results. These frustrations, hopefully, will not fatally affect the merit of what I have written to this point. I consider this document to be a place to begin a broader discussion, looking towards the NALL conference in October. Those who see that they have been left out, slighted or misunderstood will have an opportunity to say so.

Academic Collaboration: Against the grain

The SSHRC review committee had difficulty establishing a clear sense of connections between NALL projects in part because of decisions that Network organizers made early on about how to constitute and mobilize the Network. Specifically, they decided to provide smaller grants to more researchers rather than larger grants to fewer. (The exception here was the national survey.) Recognizing that informal learning is “Other-centered,” they also attempted to give primacy to researchers who, because they were working with non-dominant groups, were less likely than others to receive academic funding.

I am a good case in point. My community-based study of informal learning in a psychiatric survivor courier company would not have happened without NALL funding and the support of a broader researcher team. Roxana Ng noted the same thing about her research into the Homeworkers Association in Toronto. A project of UNITE, the HWA teaches immigrant women language and job skills through formal instructions (ESL classes) and through mutual aid (teaching each other). “I would not have obtained funding to further the research,” she acknowledged, “without financial and academic support from NALL.”
These funding decisions had a major impact on the kind of Network that emerged. For one thing, it is large – almost 50 projects – and it includes academics from a range of disciplines and institutions across the country. Writing about the interdisciplinary quality of her own network, Neysmith recalls that:

Members had individual programs of research (with their) own theoretical and policy questions. Consequently, network discussions meant negotiating different disciplinary terrains. The process required a continuous struggle with language and concepts. In addition, these professional and disciplinary literatures have not, for the most part, systematically addressed (the primary focus of the network)” (2000: 12).

She found this a struggle for a network of 13. How much more difficult it is for NALL with 100 plus members. In spite of the Network’s size, and the complexity of its field sites, principal investigators indicated that the best part about participating is the opportunity to connect to and collaborate with other people. Let me give examples that illustrate this from three different angles.

Research Teams

A scan across NALL’s Year Four reports reveals that the bulk of its research teams, those people identified as project leaders, are comprised of university-based academics directing students. (I counted three academics working alone.) The remaining projects represent variations on this theme including academics/students with union/labor co-investigators, and academics/students with co-investigators from community (First Nations) organizations. There are several more complex combinations that, although the players didn’t report on them, must have presented challenges.

The four core PLAR projects, for example, were coordinated by a combination of academics, labor movement and community college representatives with the significant addition of the community-based PLA Centre in Halifax. The Labour Education project was guided by a team that included one academic, one graduate student, one labor representative, one independent researcher and two university-based advisors. Similarly, the project on Aboriginal women and coalition work was guided by one academic, one student, a representative of a First Nations organization and a First Nations community-based researcher.

Independent researchers were involved in several other projects. I want to red flag this for both NALL and the SSHRC, not only to raise the profile of workers such as myself but to mark our engagement in significant academic work from a non-university base. Typically invisible, our presence is one of the ways that the work of NALL actually got done.

In terms of the mechanics of team-work, the national survey project faced the challenge of having international co-investigators, while the Canadian Teacher Learning survey had to negotiate support from six teacher affiliates. Working with diverse
leadership, most case studies were focused on a single site, community or organization. An exception here is the “social learning team” initiated by Eric Shragge. Rounding up Jean-Marc Fontan, Roxana Ng and I, he formed a group focused on three community/union organizations that work with people excluded from the labor market.

As researchers, we share an interest in learning that is shaped by the socio-political cultural of those organizations. However, we encompass significant differences in terms of ethnicity, gender, language and geography. Three of our members are tenured within the university while one is an independent researcher. Located in Montreal, the two men are examining Chic Resto Pop, a community restaurant that is designed as a place of training for people on social assistance. Located in Toronto, the two women have studied A-Way Express, a courier service that is operated by psychiatric survivors (Church), and the Homeworkers’ Association, a labor union working with unemployed members and homeworkers in the garment and textile sector who are mainly immigrant women (Ng).

Using the Network’s resources, we joined forces “to enrich our individual projects and to extend them into collaborative work that will enable us to go beyond what any one of us might have generated alone.” Over time, we came to understand that:

whether because of our actual location or our approach to research and politics, we often feel marginal. We are ‘bridge’ people: the university-based members play active roles in providing academic support to community organizations and social movements; the community-based member plays an active role in carrying the issues and knowledge/s of community groups into academe (Church, Fontan, Ng and Shragge, 2000:4).

We learned to appreciate how each of us sees the world as well as to show how the particular contexts in which we work differ and shape our understanding of the issues. Commenting on the team’s process, Shragge noted that it was “challenging and rewarding… Our first task in building a common project was to understand our differences and commonalities. This challenge was often more implicit than explicit. Our (initial) successes in working through the problems came from face-to-face meetings.” We have since discovered how difficult it is to sustain this kind of dialogue over a long period of time.

Marilyn Laiken’s research provides another team example. Its purpose is to locate and study organizations world-wide which are using organizational learning approaches to embed ongoing learning within the actual work processes – individual or group levels. Carried out with a group of graduate students, the research examines models of organizational learning. Commenting on this Laiken said: “The best part was working with the graduate students in an ongoing effort to function effectively as a team. We experienced powerful learning through a conscious process of engaging to work through challenges of managing style differences and research approaches. So there was a lot of informal learning among the research team.”
NALL Groups

NALL advances its objectives through the research and program development activities of its six working groups. They are described as follows:

- **Group 1**, the National Survey of Informal Learning Practices,” has conducted the first national in-depth survey of informal learning practices which will establish definitive benchmarks on the extent and character of the deliberate informal learning activities of Canadian adults, as well as differential patterns by formal further course-based continuing education participation and social background.

- **Group 2**, “Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR),” is documenting the current types, extent and use of prior learning recognition by educational institutions. This group will also analyze the differential success of alternative approaches in both detecting applicants' relevant informal knowledge and encouraging sustained and equitable participation in education and training programs.

- **Group 3**, “Informal Learning Cultures,” is studying the informal learning cultures of major disadvantaged social groups and exploring the means for more effectively linking these forms of knowledge with further and further course-based continuing education programs.

- **Group 4**, “Learning and Work Transitions,” is examining processes of informal work-related learning in the multiple transitions between organized educational programs and employment throughout the life course, and is developing curricular materials to enhance the entry/re-entry of people into employment.

- **Group 5**, “Informal Learning in Different Workplaces; Corporate, Cooperative, Union, School-Community,” investigates and compares approaches to informal learning in different types of workplaces, organizations, households and community settings, and maps relations with formal/non-formal education activities in such settings.

- **Group 6**, “Computer-based Informal Learning,” analyses the informal learning networks used by participants in computer-based adult learning programs.

These groups have faced very different kinds of challenges. For example, Group 2 participants and those in other NALL groups interested in PLAR come from a wide variety of backgrounds: teaching agencies, labor organizations, employers, voluntary groups, individual learners and families. They possess a wide variety of values, principles for action and experience with PLAR. Most, though not all of them, are represented in the group. “To a degree, the membership of Group 2, even its missing interests, represents a microcosm of the agencies and interests involved in the utilization of PLAR anywhere in the world.”

Members began their NALL work at a time when use, experience, and writings with respect to PLAR were all growing rapidly. Over the past few years, new agencies have appeared with an active interest in PLAR; eg. Human Resources Development
Canada; the Canadian Labour Force Development Board; the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment, the Ontario Prior Learning Assessment Network and various other provincial regional bodies, public and private. The results of Group Two projects are of immediate strategic importance in relation to these new players.

Group Two takes in a range of projects with a common focus. All are “devoted to exploring the principal current procedure for translating the outcomes of informal learning to formal recognition, and making use of that recognition to complete formal programs.” In some cases, the same researchers are responsible for several interconnected projects. So, for example, Alan Thomas and Monica Collins took the lead on four (of eight) projects devoted to the development of PLAR directly and indirectly in other countries.

Consolidation of existing but dispersed information has been a major concern for these core projects. They were intended to: establish and maintain a current portrait of the use of PLAR by potential students and providing agencies; co-ordinate information on PLAR currently held by various bodies; establish a systematic PLAR bibliography and to identify; openly explore the values and principles of PLAR held by various groups. This multi-faceted focus on a single program made for a cohesiveness that was more difficult to establish in other groups.

The most obvious contrast to Group Two is Group Five. Its members are gathered together under the title “informal learning in different workplaces: corporate, cooperative, union, school-community.” This group is an ‘umbrella’ cluster for a large number of projects, each with its own goals, objectives and resources. Unlike other groups within the network, we had no single task, such as the completion of a national survey, and no single focus such as PLAR. At the first two NALL conferences, we spent much of our allotted time finding out who was there and listening to each other describe the projects that we brought to the table. We struggled with several questions: “Why are we a group?” “What do we have in common?” “How could our work as a larger group advance our other projects?” One of our first points of agreement was openly oppositional. We didn’t “get” the definition of informal learning that was being advanced from “NALL Central.” It didn’t match what we observed in our various sites.

Group Five members Kari Dehli and Doreen Fumia are conducting a study that seeks to understand how elementary teachers participating in School Advisory Councils learn about contemporary school reform. They are especially interested in how teachers learn about the kinds of changes that are claimed to make them and the schools where they teach more accountable to parents. About her involvement with NALL, Dehli noted: “The initial discussions with Group Five ‘misfits’ were very helpful and important because they enabled us to question some of the key assumptions of the NALL process. Subsequent discussions in meetings and email exchanges have continued these discussions and this networking has been very useful.”

Group Five members have done more than just disagree. A core group has been created, met several times independent of other NALL assemblies, and worked to identify
a collective project beyond those for which members are directly accountable. Speaking to his involvement in that process, Shragge noted that “the work (the social learning group) did on a discussion paper for a Group Five meeting was a turning point for us. We took some of the perspectives we gained from that work into the final version of our first monograph.” He goes on to point out that “The existence of quasi-independent research projects within a decentralized structure were the key elements that supported and at the same time did not support the building of collaborative research. The initiative to build our team and connect with Group Five was initiated ‘from below’ and not by ‘NALL Central.’”

As a student researcher, Mary Stratton was the primary liaison between NALL and the Centre for the Study of Training, Investment and Economic Restructuring (CSTIER) at Carleton University on a project focused on women and community economic development. Commenting on her experience in this role, she noted that “NALL members, especially via Group Five, have encouraged and valued my participation at the network level. Participation in NALL provides an opportunity to work with others in drawing academic and structural attention to important issues (as well as having a) much greater potential for affecting needed change.”

**Network-Wide**

In the opening chapter of Restructuring Caring Labour, Neysmith deliberately names the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada as a player:

because public funding was part of our strategy to ensure that our work had visibility. The network grant accorded legitimacy and some material support for bringing us together across disciplinary and geographic boundaries, and made space for work that is often squeezed out and marginalized in academia” (2000: 2).

Asked about the significance of NALL, its principal investigators also discussed the opportunity to break down some of the separations from other scholars that are characteristic of academic work-life. NALL provided an organized and structured way for researchers from a variety of sites to connect with each other, exchange ideas and develop a collective analysis. “Without NALL we never would have got started,” Bruce Spencer noted, bluntly, while David Livingstone asserted that a national survey “would have been impossible without the support of an extensive research network.”

Rona Abromovitch’s project is concerned with informal learning in the Transitional Year Program at the University of Toronto. The major goal is to understand and facilitate the valuing and validation of informally learned knowledge that TYP students bring to the formal university setting. For these researchers, participation in NALL was “crucial” and “a key reason for the advancement of our research.” Central to this was the pooling of expertise and skills among a range of participants: students, faculty, staff, and community members.
The Burns, Beaudin, Meawasige and Olson project is an evaluation of the N’Swakamok Native Friendship Centre in Sudbury. It is a study in the movement to create agencies that will both reflect and be controlled by First Nations. These researchers noted that working with NALL had given them “the impetus to systematically do comparative work in a variety of North Eastern Ontario First Nations educational sites. It has also forced us to consider how the findings we are observing compared with other Groups 3 and 5 work on other communities trying to carry out community building agendas.” In other words, the comparative aspects of a network prompted questions about what is specific to particular organizational environments and what is more universal.

In Thunder Bay, researcher Thomas Dunk undertook a project that examined the relationship between class divisions, the production of knowledge and its recognition or reception in society. The empirical focus was the way in which working class individuals learn about nature and the environment and how this knowledge is either legitimized through its incorporation into science or is socially invalidated as irrelevant or unsubstantiated. Of his association with NALL he reported that email and the electronic discussion list “kept me up to date on what was going on in other institutions, and provided me with a knowledge of and sometime access to lectures, articles, books and conferences that I would not otherwise know about.”

Along with face to face meetings at conferences, these were/are the crucial mechanisms for facilitating connections among NALL members. In Dunk’s case, the Network was also a source of references, names and ideas regarding education and training. The same was true for Peter Sawchuk who, as a student member, found that participation provided valuable research exposure as well as professional contacts with leading researchers in his field including his external doctoral examiner.

NALL has been an important conceptual reference point for its members in providing a theoretical framework for people to work with (or against). Materials provided and events organized by the Network created awareness amongst its members of the practices and debates around informal learning as well as “an opportunity to reflect upon the interweaving of non-formal and informal and the possible connections to formal learning.” It gave people a way to start their research or expand its scope, “to ask some questions about informal learning that otherwise would not have been asked.” Participants found it “exciting to be positioned with access to developing theoretical work.”

At the same time, principal investigators reported a range of problems with their projects. On the ground they had to contend with delays in getting survey instruments into the field and finding student researchers, difficulties scheduling interviews and disruptions in those fragile schedules as a result of sabbaticals and students moving on. All of this had to be managed within a larger context of busy, demanding academic and partner environments. The worst part of the project, noted one pi “was finding the time to do justice to the research with all the other responsibilities of academia.” Another noted the fact that “institutional obstacles – practical and political – made it difficult to
gain formal permission to interact with research subjects in many jurisdictions.” A third referred to the frustrations of negotiating labor movement politics.

In terms of NALL itself, the basic difficulties had to do with money and reporting. The main barrier to a successful project for some pi’s was limited financial resources. The basic level of funding was perceived to be low. Finding time to adequately investigate and analyze findings on Graduate Assistant funding was not easy. Network members have learned that it is just as much work to do a study with a small grant as it is to do one with a larger amount. They have been frustrated by the labor that was required not just to mobilize and complete projects but to report on them. For many, the administrative demands were simply too much.

Although it would have limited the number of projects, larger amounts of money would have allowed some researchers to follow through on (implicit) commitments they made to the communities with which they worked. For example, Shahrazad Mojab and Susan McDonald are conducting a study on the public legal education needs of immigrant women in domestic violence situations or women who have experienced violence as a result of war in their country of origin (e.g. Kurdish women). These researchers fostered an evolving “methodology of testimony” which means that the women are not recounting their painful past for the sake of the data, but to understand and participate in social change. “We have done this process with these women and created expectation and desire and the energy for turning that testimony into some kind of action and change,” reported Mojab. However, without more resources the anticipated action cannot happen – even though the researchers are “very much committed to those communities and we want to go back and we want to do something because we think that we owe it to them.”

**Community partnerships: Engaging the politics**

With a range of projects that attempted to focus on the margins rather than the power centers in society, NALL organizers made a commitment to working with what they termed “community partners” in ways that would be genuinely collaborative. As Network Director David Livingstone noted in a recent letter, “Community partners have been given sustained opportunities to participate equally in shaping the (Network’s) research agenda. This is fully consistent with the originating principles for establishing the SSHRC Networks in Education and Training.”

Like its academic members, the Network partners are diverse including forms such as co-ops, unions, corporate and community organizations. One of their strengths (whether as collaborators or as sites) is that they force researchers to attend to the needs and priorities of people outside the university community, to write and represent issues in terms other than those valued by academic journals and textbooks. A good example is The Skills and Knowledge Profile, a PLAR project. Written in plain language with accessible layout, it is the result of two years of NALL (and other) funded action research organized by Advocates for Community-based Training and Education for Women (ACTEW) in Toronto. Another example is A Resource Guide For Women’s Studies Practice: Students Linking Academe and Community (Estable and Meyer with Ng, 2000)
Although grouped in a single category, NALL partners actually represent different histories, traditions and environments. The primary distinction is between labor unions and community organizations – with labor in this instance being more dominant. In his introductory remarks to a thick report on labor education in Canada, Winston Gereluk observes that:

the majority of the aims, objectives and methods of labour education are not encountered in any body of easily-accessible resource materials; they must be extracted from such sources as writings and speeches of labour leaders and union staff, information sheets and newsletters, brochures, occasional manuscripts, policy papers and proceedings from conferences and conventions of the labour movement. Many are derived through inference as a primary feature of labour education is that it is inseparable from and crucial to the aims of the host union, and the labour movement itself; i.e., it has a dynamic relationship to the ongoing life and process of the organization which is not found, for the most part, in the formal education system. (February 2000: 2).

Even so, enough historical work has been done that Spencer can trace the outline three types of related education. The first is union education, which he defines as “all education offered by unions for their members and is particularly focused on preparing activists for leadership roles in the union.” The second is workers’ education, which “is associated with the turn- of-the-century provision of non-vocational liberal adult education.” Spencer spends most of his attention on the third type: labor education, it being “broader in scope than mainstream union provision, can encompass all labour studies courses targeted at union members, and perhaps workers generally, but should be interpreted as excluding labour studies programs targeted at a general student body” (1998a). Within labor studies, he distinguishes between courses that focus on tools, issues (e.g. sexual harassment or racism), and issues (i.e. the union context and its perspective).

Community organizations are much less well understood and documented as learning environments and as producers of certain kinds of knowledge. Most are environments in which questions of informal learning have not previously been raised. The following (much abbreviated) list gives you a sense of the diversity of these sites within the Network. Some of NALL’s most interesting work will come from organizations such as these.

- The N’Swakamok Native Friendship Centre in Sudbury is an urban based Native educational authority running projects across a wide range of programs including an alternative school, social activities, programs of cultural re-enforcement, programs aimed at quality of Native life, family and child
development, pre-natal program, employment services, courtwork, drug and alcohol counseling, translation, youth services and HIV/AIDS education program.

- The 761 Community Development Corporation is a community organization in downtown Toronto. It was established in 1995 to work in partnership with people who have experienced long-term poverty to create employment opportunities through community-based entrepreneurial initiatives.

- The Halifax PLAR Centre is a joint project involving five Halifax universities, the provincial community college system, and representatives from community groups, voluntary organizations, labor, the private sector and government. The PLA Centre offers individuals and groups individual interviews with a PLA advisory, transferable skills workshops and portfolio development courses. It also works to encourage education and training institutions to recognize prior learning achievements for admission, program placement and advanced standing.

- Growing Jobs for Living Coalition (GJOBS) is an adult education and participatory research project in the Quinte region of eastern Ontario. The area is characterized by high unemployment and under-employment, and by environmental degredation (with links to health problems). GJOBS provides a socio-political and environmental context within which to stimulate learning. Its largest project is in Community Shared Agriculture.

- Gerin-Lajoie’s research examines closely the role of a variety of Francophone minority community associations and organizations in the reproduction of the French language and culture. Sites that are of particular interest to her include, for example, Direction-Jeunesse, Association canadienne-francaise de l’Ontario, and Scouts du Canada.

- The Big Carrot, a worker co-operative, is a natural foods retailer in the east end of Toronto with 75 employees. It is the largest single retailer of natural foods in the country with annual sales in 1997 of $8 million and has been consistently profitable over the past three years (Quarter and Midha, 2000).

- The Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women is a national, not-for-profit organization committed to advancing women’s equality through research. Founded in 1976, CRIAW is a bilingual, membership based organization which bridges the gap between the community and academe, and between research and action.

In some cases, community sites are comprised of multiple forms or organizations. For example, George Dei and Stephanie Cheddie are examining independent learning strategies and prior learning styles developed and utilized in the Kensington community of Toronto. This is a geographic area west of Spadina Avenue and South of College Street. With a diverse history dating back to the 1780’s, Kensington today, is a “mecca for cultural and consumer consumption. Diverse groups, varying in ethnicity, class and age shop at the Kensington market.” The researchers view Kensington as an excellent site of learning that incorporates diverse spaces such as bars, restaurants, cafes, clothing store, food stores (general and specialty), fish markets, meat stores and bakeries. They find it a very friendly community and a great site in which to work.
In other cases, community participants have no formal organizational location or affiliations. Kurdish women, for example, are facing “massive social and economical problems, unknown even to some of us who have been in contact with the community for a long time. These women carry the long history of war, violence, displacement, and trauma. Illiteracy in English and any other languages that they speak is common. Even the educated ones are trapped in the cycle of low-paying service oriented jobs” (Mojab, email, October 25, 1999). Part of Mojab and McDonald’s project is to assist these study participants to become organized around collective needs and problems. They see the most important task in their study to be “establishing a network among the women participants in this project. This requires organizing regular gatherings, planning activities, taking steps towards implementing some ideas etc.” (email December 14, 1999). The task takes its toll emotionally. “The most difficult part of the research,” Mojab wrote, “was the exhaustion and stress we experienced through the data collection phase.”

Whatever the location, NALL’s principal investigators were more than pleased to get out of the university and into the field. They valued the opportunity to engage with partners and explore the various sites, to learn from the work and to share the learning with others in a regular and organized way. For example, Celia Haig-Brown partnered with Kaaren Dannenman of the Treaty Three Trappers’ Association to document and organize a pilot program which “allows the space needed for traditional Aboriginal knowledge keepers to develop a pedagogy of the land.” The best part about this experience was:

planning the trips to the place where the (Aboriginal) course is offered because it actualized the premise on which the curriculum was based: that the land is the place where learning begins. (The location features) trails through the bush, the ice and snow of late winter and the waves and vastness of the lake in summer. Because this particular space has been continuously occupied by Aboriginal people since time immemorial… working there is a constant reminder of the significance of the (re)development of a traditional pedagogy and the restoration of traditional knowledge to its place with the people of the land (Year Four report).

Researchers working with union partners mentioned the satisfaction of new or renewed contact with rank and file workers. A good example is the project that Syd Schnaid directed with the Telecommunications Workers Union and communications unions across Canada. It involved action research into the impact of introducing a major enterprise resource planning system in the Canadian telecommunications industry. In particular, it examined how union members learn and adjust to the new systems and work processes through both formal and informal means. Researchers were particularly pleased when it became obvious that telecommunications workers themselves possessed the tacit skills necessary to make these new systems function – and that managers were actually relying on this expertise.
By participating in the NALL project the workers themselves have gained insight and self-confidence. They have overcome their sense of fear and isolation that they experienced individually in the face of unprecedented technological change. They gained self-confidence in their ability to communicate their individual insights into the system; by sharing these insights they have come to the conclusion that their tacit knowledge is essential to the operation of the system (Year Four report).

NALL researchers placed high value on direct, practical outcomes such as this emerging from their research. With the Canadian Labour Congress, Jeff Taylor is conducting a study into how formalized learning relates to more informal dimensions of learning both on and off-line in connection with union-based tele-learning. He reported that the best part of his project was “working with the community partner to devise a program of activity and research that meets the partner’s needs.” Among those who felt good that their work was useful outside the university walls were research consultants working for CRIAW. They conducted a study that focused on student practica as a site for informal learning. The researchers were specifically interested in practica in women’s organizations as a form of “training” for students enrolled in women’s studies programs. The most positive aspect of this research experience was that it produced information that is useful to all the actors involved in women's studies practica.

Defending the Connection

In Writing the Social, sociologist and NALL member Dorothy Smith argues that “No intellectual enterprise can subsist in a social vacuum.”

Every such enterprise participates in something we could call, perhaps euphemistically, a community. Because we are working with texts, reading and writing texts, the existence and significance of that community are often invisible to use. Yet it is always implicit in what we write. How, then, are we to defend and intensify connections beyond the academy against the multiple ways it inhibits them? (1999: 27)

Her words point to a primary dilemma of NALL’s existence: defending and intensifying these “inhibited” community connections.

Many among us are knowledgeable about what it takes to cross university/community boundaries. Our thoughts resonate with those of the late George Burns who reported on a research and development project that involves five Aboriginal jurisdictions.

The research takes place in the Aboriginal settings themselves. And all people associated with the research project, including the researcher, are Aboriginal people. And they’re from the local communities. And some of these communities are over 200 miles apart. Robert (Beaudin) mentioned that I am the academic but it is the other way around. It’s my role to stay out of the role of the
Aboriginal people, and allow them to do what they ought to be allowed to do and that is to find their own space to do their own research in the manner in which they see fit (Group Three transcript).

This process can be unsettling. Budd Hall and Doreen Clover did a study with the Steering Committee members of Growing Jobs for Living Coalition (GJOBS) in Quinte. The primary purpose was to find out what informal learning activities members were involved in, how and what this process of social learning contributed to the coalition and how they understood the relation between their informal learning and the non-formal learning opportunities provided by GJOBS. At the beginning of the study, the researchers gave Steering Committee members a draft of the interview questions for comment. Discussing these questions turned out to be the worst part of the research. One member was extremely opposed to using interviews and remained highly critical throughout. Hall and Clover acknowledged that, no matter how sensitive or well-intentioned the researcher, interviews create objects of study (interviewees) – something some GJOBS participants vocally disliked.

Even when this process goes well, it can lead to unexpected outcomes. “In forming authentic and sustained partnerships with non-academic groups,” Ng wrote, “especially those who work with marginal sectors of the population, the academic researcher has to be willing to accommodate the needs of the partner organization.” This may involve altering the original research plan. In the present study, I was asked by UNITE and the HWA to help them update the conditions of homeworkers by incorporating additional questions into my interviews with homeworkers. Surprisingly, it is this part of the research that has received the most publicity and yielded policy and programmatic results (Year Four report).

Regardless of how it goes the university-community relationship is always complex. Mojab’s attempt to use a participatory, feminist, anti-racist, anti-colonial approach illustrates a more general struggle. “I think that the richness of our data is very much related to our connection with the community that we work with in terms of the language, in terms of understanding the subtleties of the culture, historical, social background of each community that we worked with,” she reported. However, the project was delayed going through ethical review because of the university’s concerns over legal liability. Mojab felt that, in the way concerns were raised, the university pathologized and legalized potential participants who were illegal immigrants or didn’t have a status. In order for the study to go ahead, some women were excluded from participating.

NALL’s relationship with SSHRC has also been problematic. Although there is a clear “NALL Central,” the Network is relatively de-centered. Not only have individual researchers been given a lot of autonomy to run projects as they see fit but partner organizations, too, have a lot of influence in the direction and shape of research projects. So much so that SSHRC reviewers were uncomfortable about who was in control. In their mid-term report, the review committee noted:
the absence of an overall conceptual framework that would facilitate a better integration of the different and numerous research projects. While admitting that co-determination is a very democratic way to proceed, we wondered if this really was the best approach for rigorous systematic research. Our main concern is that this participatory style could lead to fragmentation and few lasting results (SSHRC mid-term review).

The review committee strongly encouraged the Network Director to set up a small group of experts in the area to pull together all of the projects, to identify the missing components and to take responsibility for the development of a conceptual framework. However, Steering Committee members felt that taking such a step would “undermine the participatory action research principles and methods that are basic to the operation of NALL.”

Curiously, the evaluation committee first celebrates the great potential of this model for those working in any research network, then suggests that the consensual management style and strong participation of community partners that are inherent in this approach could negatively affect the quality of the scholarly projects…. It would be most unfortunate if the recognized progress that we have made toward genuine researcher-partner collaboration were undermined by the arbitrary reassertion of a more conventional university-centric model of scholarship (Letter to Yves Mougenot, SSHRC, January 31, 2000).

The knowledge that “there is no necessary contradiction between genuine community participation and high quality scholarship” is a primary point of coalescence within the Network. Ironically, it is a point that is unrecognized and/or delegitimated by our funder.4

Divergent Methods

One of the early problems for Network organizers was how to orient a highly diverse membership to informal learning. The “aides” they created included an extensive bibliography of what were deemed important readings in the area. Six core articles were circulated as was a set of lecture notes by David Livingstone (1998). This strategy required members to do substantial reading. Novices had to layer the new material on top of existing demands within other fields of study or stemming from other projects.5 The limitation here was time. As Neysmith points out about the Caring Network, “One of the themes that surfaced repeatedly in our discussions was that precious resource called time: time to think; time to communicate, laugh, and love; time to take action. From day one it was a scarce asset” (2000: 24).

Because of time pressures, a good number of us actually picked up on dominant debates within the Network in fleeting rather than focused ways. For example, in addition to sitting in meetings, my understanding of informal learning began from reading (and keeping hard copy of) the provisional definition that was circulated over the discussion list. It read:
Informal learning is any activity involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge or skill that occurs outside the curricula of institutions providing educational programs, courses or workshops. Informal learning may occur in any context outside institutional curricula. It is distinguished from everyday perceptions and general socialization by people’s own conscious identification of the activity as significant learning. The basic terms of informal learning (objectives, content, means and processes of acquisition, duration, evaluation of outcomes, applications) are determined by the individuals and groups who choose to engage in it, without the presence of an institutionally-authorized instructor (Ed-Train, November 1998).

Hard on its heels came a note from member, Allen Tough. It read:

We could sharpen this definition of informal learning by saying that the person’s PRIMARY motivation (at least 50% of the total motivation) for these activities is to gain and retain certain definite knowledge or skills or understanding. Otherwise, we end up including episodes in which learning was only 10% of the person’s overall motivation (email, November 21, 1998).

[“Extraordinary,” I thought. “50%.”] This casual exchange later became food for thought for the Shragge research team as well as for Group Five.

In the same way, I picked up on debates over the use of the terms “further” or “continuing” education to refer to “all other organized educational activities, including further courses, training programs, and workshops offered by any social institution” (Livingstone, 1999:50). There were, I discovered, people who felt that the term “non-formal” was more accurate.

Now I know the term ‘non-formal education’ is not favoured within NALL and I understand why. What is being referred to is what we might call ‘traditional adult education’ but adult education has come to mean all education of adults and has lost any distinctiveness it may have had. David’s choice of ‘further education’ also has problems as it has been used in the past to refer to post-school formal education not part of the higher educational system. For the most part NALL is distinguishing informal learning from the learning that takes place in more formal settings therefore naming that which is neither formal nor informal is not that important. If we have to name it I would urge sticking with Canadian adult education conventions – non-formal education or site of learning – until we come up with something better. (Bruce Spencer, email, January 2000)

Along with the prepared materials, and perhaps more than anyone recognized, these kinds of exchanges effectively established a conceptual framework for the Network.

There were, however, differential responses to this framework. Very broadly speaking, some researchers already understood or quickly learned the formal/non-formal/informal distinctions. With a clear sense of what informal learning was, they saw
their task as measuring it (in order to assess increases or decreases in comparison with other surveys, for example) or describing it within new sites and organizational environments. In other words, for some members, informal learning waited “out there” to be discovered. As Tough pointed out, you simply had to know what you were looking for.

What I found is that doctoral students, because they had the conceptual framework in their head, were better at getting at ‘learning projects’ than the surveys where we paid a research organization to do it. The (latter) were using people who didn’t understand the phenomenon well enough to really probe and get people to recall it. (1999 remarks to NALL conference)

Other researchers understood their task as starting with a site and building towards a concept. Far from “discovering” informal learning, they saw themselves creating knowledge of it as part of their academic practice. They did so using various theoretical frameworks and, sometimes, reading against the grain of the recommended literature. As Shragge observed in his year four report, “A lot of the researchers heading up projects were unfamiliar with the concept of informal learning. We were recruited to join the network for other reasons including previous research interests and experiences. We had to figure out how we could define our perspective on informal learning, and how to then link that to our debates and discussions in the wider Network.”

The tension between these two approaches is obvious. Some (but not all) of it has to do with different methods. Take, for example, Ari Antikainen’s description of his work. “We are investigating inter-subjective social reality by means of qualitative logic,” he states, “not statistical representativeness. We are using a biographical method, namely a life-history approach composed of a narrative biographical interview and a thematic interview … We have made an attempt toanalyse people’s everyday life as it appears in narrative biographical interviews and theme interviews concerning learning biography. From this point of view, we can argue that people learn by living” (1996:13).

Different sites, standpoints and methods have taken research projects under the same organizational umbrella in different directions to the point where they may not be comparable. As Dehli points out:

I enjoy the discussions about what variously/differently comes to ‘count’ as informal learning in the different parts of the network. It seems to me that the very requirement to count, which a survey demands, does produce some activities as informal learning, while excluding others. Small, site specific projects, on the other hand, lend themselves to noticing and note-ing processes, negotiations, ambiguities and practices in which individuals and groups engage. So, (in the Network) it’s not only a top-down versus bottom up difference, it’s also what different social science approaches bring into view (email, 2/6/2000).
What are the implications for the Network? One view is that our task is to integrate the deductive and inductive work that we have done as a contribution to the existing case studies and North American surveys that currently constitute a body of work on informal learning. But it remains to be seen whether integration of our various findings is actually possible. As Dehli argues, there “Might be some interesting political differences, too … which, following the Sennett book you reference, ‘we’ might work to bring into our public discussions” (email, 2/6/2000).7

Blurred Boundaries

I have described NALL as an affiliation of many players, theoretical frameworks, methods, and sites of enquiry. These elements make its work potentially very rich. At the same time, turning new actors and organizational environments loose on informal learning puts serious pressure on existing definitions in a field that is already troubled by “the boundary problem.” Where and how firmly to draw some lines around informal learning is clearly an ongoing problem for the Network. Where does formal learning end and informal learning begin? Are the boundaries fixed? Should they be? Must we be able to fix the meaning of informal learning? In this section, I want to look at various ways that NALL members have taken up this problem.

Flipping informal learning on its head: First Nations

A major challenge to established boundaries of informal learning comes from NALL projects that focus on Aboriginal/First Nations communities. They actually reverse the conceptual formulation. In other words, what the literature calls “formal,” First Nations communities call “informal” whereas what the literature calls “informal,” the Aboriginal “pedagogy of the land” deems formal education. Burns, Beaudin and Olson explored this through a project about First Nation’s experience, relations and practice at the Wahnapitae First Nations Resource Centre. Among a range of models, Wahnapitae represents direct First Nation location learning; Elders are the primary teachers. Although Elders have not been afforded status, power and prestige as a result of graduating from the formal education system, they are formal teachers in Aboriginal communities. “They teach that which is central to culture, heritage, self-esteem, self-concept, what it is to be Aboriginal, Aboriginal knowledge structures and pedagogical processes, problem solving processes, Aboriginal world views, self-determination, self-government and so on” (Burns, forthcoming). The formal is therefore, in many ways, highly dependent on informal knowledge. “In First Nations education, formal and informal learning are continuously and sometimes contentiously conflated.”

Group Three members discussed this extensively at their spring 2000 meeting. On the one hand, as Haig-Brown pointed out “The notion of informal learning resonates easily with the traditional pedagogy of many Aboriginal nations. Traditional Aboriginal education was a part of every day life and was life-long. Much of it is not written; some of it is sacred and cannot be written. The written form can never replace the intensity and illumination available from doing the work in its context.” On the other, she noted that with the assistance of her First Nations’ colleague, Kaaren Dannenman, she had come to
see that “what goes on in conventional schooling is what would be classified as informal knowledge in relation to indigenous cultures and indigenous knowledges. Because… it removes people from that context that is land-based. And it definitely has a colonizing dimension to it. ‘Indigenous’ in this case I’m thinking of directly as land-based knowledge that comes through the soles of your feet and into your mind.”

Dannenman elaborated, stating that “One of the big things that has been important in our community is that we want our kids to have a choice and right now they don’t. The only education they have now is the so-called formal or conventional education. They don't have the choice of learning our formal education (namely) being on the land. And it is really important for our community to re-develop that connection to the land and in that way re-establish and revitalize our culture.” Such a major inversion presents interesting opportunities. As Haig-Brown concluded: “There are so many exciting epistemological possibilities in the work that Kaaren is doing. It offers a tiny glimmer of hope that universities might actually do serious theorizing again, theorizing that has a relevance to place, to the land and the Aboriginal people.”

Doing and Learning: No Seams

Livingstone and Tough have both argued the need to distinguish informal learning from organized education, on the one hand, and from basic socialization or tacit informal learning on the other. “Explicit in formal learning” is that which can be consciously identified as significant by the learner and retrospectively recognized both in the form of knowledge and the process of acquisition. It is a discrete rather than diffuse learning experience. By contrast, with socialization, “learning and acting constitute a seamless web in which it is impossible to distinguish informal learning in any discrete way” (Livingstone, 1999:51).

Some NALL projects don’t make these distinctions. For members of Group Five, the boundaries of informal learning have always been blurred or “seamless.” We have been searching for some means, conceptually, to acknowledge the fluidity of its occurrence. Dehli and Fumia’s work is a good example. It analyzes very localized practices and relations of informal learning that are embedded in elementary school teachers’ work. For these researchers, informal learning is both voluntary and involuntary. Their study suggests that it is difficult to maintain boundaries between formal and informal, voluntary and involuntary learning. It suggests that boundaries between formal and informal learning “are vague and permeable and in some ways imposed by researchers on participants’ activities.” With coming changes in regulation and certification of teachers’ competence, the boundaries between formal and informal learning are likely to become more contentious. So, this question may become more acute in the future.

With a number of colleagues, I have been involved with a preliminary survey of users of the voicemail system operated by the 761 Community Development Corporation. The respondents were people who have experienced long-term poverty and/or homelessness. In approaching them, we anticipated that their lives would not fit neatly
into categories such as home, work and community. We changed the NALL survey questionnaire to reflect this understanding. Predictably, responses to a modified section on daily life were not as orderly and as easily categorized they were in the national survey. Despite ongoing reinforcement of the different categories of questions, respondents generally continued to provide responses that overlapped in a number of categories. It was very difficult for them to separate learning from doing; they perceived the distinction as artificial. People were clearly engaged in informal learning that was having an impact on their lives but they understood it in an experiential, more seamless way than the dominant definition of informal learning.

Another example of the blurring between learning and doing comes from a study done by Martin, Garcia and Sawchuk. Their intent was to document informal learning and the linkages between non-formal and informal learning processes concerning the issue of workplace reorganization amongst unionized workplaces in Ontario. It focused on a particular union local that was involved in an extensive series of workplace reorganization plans during a period of major sectoral restructuring. Analysis revealed the importance of the inter-play between workers’ informal learning in the union local, their research activities and their non-formal education efforts in response to management workplace reorganization schemes.

More developed themes include the notion of local traditions of inquiry, namely, a stable pattern of knowledge production development amongst workers in local unions. Another theme is the notion of learning in real time, meaning learning that was not separated from practical, ongoing action but inseparable from it. In other words, the project highlights “how local groups of workers become engaged in ongoing production and formalization of knowledge, and how informal learning, union courses and union-based research practices all occur as elements of each other. Learning and research become part of action itself rather than abstract classroom experiences.”

In New Zealand, researcher Jody Hansen conducted three interviews that addressed the question: how does a woman learn to be a dominatrix? They were done with Mistress Margaret, an Auckland-based dominatrix. She was 50 at the time of the interviews and had been in the industry three years. Mistress Margaret was new to the sex industry and didn’t know what she would need to know to be a dominatrix. “So I had a whole lot ahead of me which I didn’t anticipate. I had to start somewhere and I didn’t have a teacher. … A couple of people gave me pathetic books but they weren’t much help. I didn’t approach learning to be a dominatrix in a systematic way because I didn’t know what I was expected to know at the end of the process” (unpublished transcript).

Thus, Mistress Margaret did a lot of her learning by doing. She speculates that:

If I had found another mistress to work with, someone who had the same, for want of a better word for it, ethical standards, it would probably have speeded up the process. I learn best by practice and most of the sessions are going to be one on one, so sooner or later I’d have had to get out here and cope on my own.
Having a learning triangle of a mistress, a client and an apprentice … probably has some limitations as it changes the interpersonal dynamics of the session…. I think it is best done in small steps reinforced with a lot of practical application.

Mistress Margaret invented her own process – advertising in the paper and interviewing men about their fantasies and sexual needs. She taught herself a lot, including:

thinking on my feet, getting cues from people’s body language and then acting on them constructively, adjusting the excitement of a session so that it goes up and down, and always maintaining a sense of mystery. I work from home. Three or four one-hour sessions constitutes a good day’s work. It’s a long day in that I have to keep the phone on a long time for booking appointments, talking to potential new customers, but I’ve learned now to integrate these activities into my life.

Still, this work can’t be done by formula. “Different sessions have different challenges so it’s hard to pin point an exact formula…. It’s important to gain as much trust as possible early on…. Every sort of session has a different intrigue.”

Incidentally, learning by experience

According to Livingstone, a key dimension of current studies on informal learning is the relationship between incidental (ad hoc, spontaneous) and planned (deliberate, intentional) learning. The NALL survey, his major project, retains from Tough an emphasis on discrete learning projects or activities deliberately organized by the learner outside of educational institutions. However, in a recent paper, he also argues that informal learning doesn’t have to be planned. “It can be situationally stimulated with no prior intent…. ad hoc, incidental and only consciously recognized after the fact” (1999:54).

Livingstone and Sawchuk illustrate this point in their joint paper by telling the story of a petrochemical worker and his partner who get involved in developing a park in their neighborhood.

These people did not get together with their neighbours with a particular learning outcome in mind. Nor did any of the co-participants have an idea of the knowledge/skill forms they would come to build. Rather, knowledge/skill forms arose out of a collective non-pedagogical mode of interaction …” (unpublished, pg.16).

This example is quite similar to one given by Spencer who cites the activities undertaken by a local environmental action group: organizing meetings, preparing submissions or writing newsletters (1998b: 23). The definition called up by both is of informal learning as a process “pervading everyday life experience, the sources of what both workers and working class ethnographers have called “street smarts” (Livingstone
and Sawchuk, unpublished, pg.14). To my mind, these remarks point to the “iceberg” of experiential learning that haunts Network discussions of informal learning in general. Many Network researchers are struggling with the relationship between learning and experience, specifically with learning that arises not intentionally but simply as a feature of every day life.

Experiential knowledge is a significant feature of several Group Five projects. As sites of learning, the psychiatric-survivor run alternative businesses that I studied value both employee experience with the psychiatric treatment system (a criterion for hiring) and their experience as workers (and potential trainers) in both the business and the larger social movement. The CRIAW project on practica placements for women’s studies students identified the experiential component of learning in the field as very important for female students. Here, they gain an “experiential feel for feminism,” as they forge links between theory and practice that don’t get made in formal settings.

Stratton found that CED practitioner knowledge specific to women is very experiential, especially the angle of learning from (street-wise) program participants. The kind of learning CED practitioners value and identified as useful to their program participants was often at odds with traditionally accepted ideas about what should count as knowledge. The dominant paradigm tends to totally discount and dismiss learning and experience which is not formally credentialized. Thus, she identified a clash between CED knowledge that is recognized academically and that derived from practice in everyday life. Put another way when formal education and training opportunities do occur, there is frequently a clash between the academic and CED approaches to learning and what is counted as valid/valuable knowledge.

Jack Quarter and Harish Midha’s study (1999) explored the informal learning processes by members of a worker co-operative. Here, employees govern the organization but they don’t necessarily have formal training for the governing role. They must acquire those skills along with skills related to job performance. These researchers found that the predominant mode of job-related learning among co-op members was through informal means. The most important were learning from experience (learning by doing), one on one or group discussions and questions to internal and external experts including other members.

Mojab and McDonald’s study highlights the importance of participatory and experiential learning for Spanish and Kurdish speaking immigrant women as they grapple with the complexities of the Canadian legal system. The researchers found that women have different learning needs at different points in their experience; violence and trauma had an impact on their learning capabilities differently at various stages of their life. Learning in a formal setting is impossible at times of crisis such as separation from spouse. In the face of overwhelming need, this study shows that word of mouth is the most effective means of informal learning for women in these kinds of life situations.
The Communal ‘We’?

Collective learning

Another key area of debate is collective informal learning. This refers to the importance of recognizing that social engagement is integral to knowledge acquisition. Criticisms of past studies into informal learning honed in on their preference for individually-conducted learning among members of dominant social groups. “Collectively conducted learning processes are the least well documented part of adults’ informal learning” (Livingstone, 1999:53). They are, however, a strength of the Network. To some degree all of the case studies focus on collective learning.

In working across three employment-related community sites, the Shragge team’s primary interest was:

not in job market preparation but in the social processes that go on around that preparation and the impact they have on participants. The informal processes that we are examining in our project are not explicitly identified in the organizations. They are part of the day to day interaction between participants and staff, and are shaped by the wider culture of the organization. These we describe as informal ‘social learning’ and are linked to such issues as personal and political identification, citizenship, participation and the building of networks of solidarity (Year Four report).

The group identified three features of social learning. They include:

- Solidarity learning: takes place not according to an explicit curriculum but spontaneously and unpredictably through social interactions that foster people’s participation;
- Reshaping the definition of self: learning in which participants build new identities; they rethink who they are in relation to society;
- Organizational learning: the ways in which community organizations come to understand how to operate and position themselves within an entrepreneurial culture while continuing to carry forward their historical concerns for social and economic justice

In all cases, the learning that occurs is embedded in social interaction whether between participants, between different levels of a community organization, between organizations or between organizational representatives and their funders. Social learning is often unanticipated, incidental and dynamic in nature.

Responding to this formulation by email, Spencer indicated that he liked “the way that you are breaking up the informal learning within community groups – as Lindeman would say ‘true adult education is social education’ – and labeling it ‘social learning.’”

I would suggest that a lot of what goes on in non-formal education organized by social groups is not dissimilar to informal learning in those social groups. This becomes particularly clear when you look at labour education. It has the three
elements you describe. I would argue therefore that what you are describing for social learning takes place informally in community, labour and other solidarity groups and also in non-formal educational events organized by them. The essential feature of this type of informal and non-formal education is that it is transformational (individually and socially) whereas most formal education is accommodative/adaptive (email, 24/01/2000).

Within Group Five, of which the Shragge team is a part, a consensus is emerging around informal learning as a social process, characterized by relationship. We observed that people are thrown together (or deliberately choose to meet), groups form and learning results from the social interaction. We noted that the term ‘communities of practice’ drawn from the work of Lave (e.g. 1995) and her colleagues has become key to Laiken and her student team’s investigation of learning organizations. Also, in the CSTEIR study of women and community economic development (CED), Stratton discovered that learning from others, especially low-income program participants, is a significant part of practitioner learning. This happens individually but also through networks of people active in the field.

A key concept to emerge from Hall and Clover’s study is the idea of informal learning as an integral part of social learning (making a better contribution to GBOBS) and not just something geared toward personal growth. Participants noted time and again that, although informal learning was extremely important, it was the social learning structures and spaces of the non-formal education activities organized by GJOBS that contributed the most to community citizenship. The non-formal learning processes validated the informal. In the focus group process, participants came to understand both non-formal and informal as part of social learning.

For First Nations communities, studies of informal learning come out of a context in which they are seeking self-governance. As Burns pointed out:

What I’m saying is that the Aboriginal people are both distinct and unique, based on other inherent rights that they have, treaty rights and constitutional rights. And within those rights they have the right to self-government. That is, every First Nations has a right to formulate and operate its own government. No other Group in Canadian society has that right. There is no mandate for an ethnic group, for example, to go out and develop its own government, where as the Aboriginal people are distinct and unique in the sense that they have that right among other rights (Group Three transcript).

For Mojab and McDonald, the most exciting part of the research was “noting the growing interest and group formation among women. The women involved … are calling themselves ‘The Right to Know’ group, indicating a growing sense of collective purpose. Such purpose does not occur easily… Evidence of group cohesion was a turning point in the research experience.” Further:
What came out very strikingly was the importance of collective learning, again, not during crisis periods but the importance of learning together, and from their own experiences, with input from people like professionals, not necessarily lawyers, but people who would have the knowledge they were seeking. But there is also the importance of learning from one another. The women learned through word of mouth. And it was in the community that they were learning: in the park, in the laundromat, as they waited at the school to pick up their kids. And what was a little disturbing was that much of this legal information was incomplete in inaccurate, and had profound implications if they then went through the legal system (Group Three transcript).

The purpose of Taylor’s project is to investigate the informal learning practices surrounding the trial use of new tele-learning technologies as part of the CLC’s labour education and training activities. An important question is how they do or don’t relate to the educational principles and cultural values espoused by trade unions, namely mutuality, collective action and solidarity. The researchers are concerned that the core union values are only partially reflected in the types of isolating practice that tele-learning may tend to encourage. Preliminary findings suggest that there are important dimensions of the tele-learning that are rooted in the social and material organization of people’s lives off line in terms of their time, space and energy to participate. Webs of contacts both online and offline may be important as well.

The main purpose of the Working Class Learning Project is to further document the actual learning practices of working class people starting from the household. Preliminary results confirm the general findings of the NALL National survey that working class people engage at least as extensively in informal learning as those in more affluent class positions. New information generated is in the area of documenting collective learning practices that had previously been ignored. Preliminary interviews suggest that working class households construct a wide variety of strategies for coping with schooling, ranging from active cooperation by both parents and children to active resistance to overt discrimination by some older adolescents.

Although how they might relate to each other isn’t yet clear, NALL has a cluster of projects addressing the question of collective learning that involves resistance and political action.

- The objective of Schugarensky and Myers’ study is to investigate the informal learning of adult citizens who are involved in democratic processes. It involves a case study of Toronto’s Healthy City Project and its claim that a key to achieving a healthy city is the political skills up of its citizens. The project asks how members of marginalized communities learn how the city works and obtain a voice in terms of policy. The study would like to find out, through participants’ self-examination, where and how they acquired their political learnings and the complementary/contradictory role of formal and informal learning in this regard.
Shragge notes that there has been a shift in the orientation of community organizations from conflict and rights to consensus and partnership position. For the social learning team, the question is how do community organizations work against becoming part of the regulatory apparatus of the state? We observe that there are tensions between the public policies that result in the funding of the programs and the definition of practices within the organizations. The ability of the groups to be independent of these pressures is linked to their visions, traditions and social/political power. The construction of citizenship in many cases is related to the degree of activity of the members in defending their organizations and constructing counter-definitions of their personal situations and collective solutions to the problems that they face.

Hall and Clover’s study identified the fact that there was no support for political group learning as a key barrier to informal learning at GJOBS. There is a major deficiency in support for social group learning activities in people’s own communities and the important role that they play in social change.

Dei and Cheddie view their Kensington community site/s as a space of social and political resistance. Many individuals within the Kensington community remain politically active and aware; they are mobilizing people to take control of their own political and economic futures. This project hopes to learn how agency is accomplished in this community of resistance.

Nina’s Basia’s research investigates provincial unions as a vehicle that teachers can use to come into a broader understanding of the educational system, education policy and reform. How do they use unions for political purposes? As governments diminish the role of school boards, how and where to unions take over?

Strategies: Debates over “Recognition”

A primary tension among NALL researchers is between members who view informal learning as a powerful strategy for validating and recognizing untapped, unrecognized or de-legitimated knowledge, and members who view it as a way of regulating and appropriating this knowledge. The advantages of “recognition” have been clearly articulated:

The collective recognition of this informal learning and its occurrence across the life course can lead to people more fully valuing both their own learning capacities and those of other social groups. By recognizing the amount of informal learning they are doing, ordinary people can begin to identify connections among the learning activities in which they are involved with their workmates, families and community members. On the other hand, they can be more articulate with trade union leadership, with employers, and with government policymakers about what kinds of learning programs should be developed and should be offered to link to the competencies and interests that are already there, rather than just accepting more unilaterally established training provisions. From the
vantage points of governments, trade unions and employers, informal learning research can enable them to become more responsive to the interests and receptivities of the workforce for different forms of educational programs. In short, with such data, learning needs can be more fully and effectively problematized and strategized in terms of needs for whom, for what and from what standpoint (Livingstone, Group Three transcript).

To date, PLAR is the most specific and well-developed strategy for linking informal learning with formal educational programs and requirements. However, a major question for PLAR researchers is whether its practices are transferable to the kinds of organizations and populations that are a focus for other NALL researchers. I am thinking here of preliminary data from Corson and Goldberg’s study on immigrant and Aboriginal first languages as prior learning qualifications. It indicated that the relationship between formal and informal learning may be dependent on context (e.g. workplaces versus academic settings).

Several NALL projects are looking for the practical equivalent of PLAR. Some of the participants of Hall and Clover’s study of GJOBS were unclear why informal and non-formal learning were treated as disconnected. A crucial point that emerged as a result was that in terms of working towards socio-environmental change, informal learning by GJOBS members had to be augmented by socially oriented non-formal, collective learning processes if it was to be most effective in terms of building citizenship and creating change.

In Schnaid’s study, workers are being rendered redundant and de-skilled by the combined effects of major technological change and an attendant corporate merger. Only through a combination of personal informal learning activities and more formal structured learning will it be possible to ameliorate these negative effects. The major finding was that formal learning has been totally inadequate to the task of implementing the radically new system. Workers informal learning has overcome shortcomings of the formal training that has been supplied with the system. The study is offering guidance in how to structure both the formal and informal education that must accompany technological change. It is identifying ways in which formal learning structures and informal learning experiences can be coupled so that they are mutually reinforcing under the control of the learners to the greatest extent possible.

Laiken and her student research team found that informal learning in the workplace is best mobilized through peer consultation, team reflection, informal “communities of practice” on the job action learning and personal self-directed learning on line and in other environments. These are key components of organizational learning. On-site informal learning has a great deal more impact on actually changing behavior at work than does either the formal learning of a degree program or the non-formal learning of classroom training sessions when these are engaged in isolation from each other. However, the impact seems to be greatest when the three are combined.
In Stratton’s study of women and CED, participants identified informal learning as more often useful than formal learning to them in their work. The relationship between formal and informal learning emerges as highly complex, sometimes complementary, often uneasy. A strong but positive theme that emerged in this study concerned the importance of the process of integrating various kinds of knowledge (formal and informal).

But not everyone thinks that making these kinds of connections is a good idea. As they work in conceptual terrain “where learning, politics and identity intersect,” Dehli and Fumia are asking questions about “the effects of the new regimes of teaching on teachers’ sense of self and learning (informally and otherwise) of teaching differently and making that work visible and accountable to others.” While teachers’ identities are at stake in these negotiations, so are their bodies. The teachers Fumia interviewed identified physical reactions (health problems) arising in response to dysjunctures between their sense of teaching and the actual demands of the job; their expectations for their work and what they are actually able to implement. Many feel continually watched by parents and members of the community. “Do the teachers learn ‘stress’ through reform?” asked Fumia in an email note. “Do they ‘learn’ how to work through stress and come out the other side of it? What does this kind of ‘learning’ benefit/product? The (re)regulated, redefined teacher? Is the ‘learning’ about negotiating the boundaries of mandates and understanding how to interpret them, resist them? Can this kind of questioning be taken up as ‘informal’ learning?”

To summarize, these researchers argue that:

It is not so much a matter of recognizing informal learning so as to enable individuals to gain access to formal education, but rather a question of negotiating the terms in which differently situated teachers’ learning and knowledge will be recognized. In a small and preliminary way, this study questions the implication that a policy objective of connecting informal learning to organized education has already been determined and that the work of research is to figure out how this may be accomplished. It questions the incitement for workers to engage in continual learning, the calls to make learning visible and countable, the means of identifying, categorizing and evaluating, and the ways in which individuals and communities are asked to become involved in advising and running public institutions (Year Four report).

Members of Group Five support this position. At our October 1999 meeting, more clearly than in previous discussions, we identified a reactionary edge to informal learning. We talked about informal learning as a strategy of governance that depends upon (requires) individuals taking responsibility for re/making themselves and regulating their own conduct. It can be viewed as power (what Foucault talked about as ‘power within’), as capital. Our discussion of this point concentrated around a cluster of words: accountability, self-
regulation, responsibility, individualization, entrepreneurialism, exclusion and governance. As that meeting, we began to identify regimes of accountability across different sites.

At its spring 2000 meeting, Group Three had an active and wide-ranging discussion about similar issues affecting most of its projects. One of the first questions raised pertained to the role of the state with respect to the learning needs of various communities. Speaking to her project, Mojab observed that:

Through our research we are becoming very celebratory of the resiliency of (Kurdish) women and their strong instinct for survivor. It is very informal; it is very empowerment; it is outside of the institutional way of learning. And so we contribute that to the process of informal learning within the definition and the debate that is provided. But if we say that this is the way that women learn, that they do it without any adherence to the resources of the state, well, what is going to be the role of the state in answering for their needs, their learning needs? And how much of it is going to be the responsibility of a community that is totally without resources? There is the danger of isolating it further without falling back into any kind of the state support and the state responsibility (Group Three transcript).

Through their administrative apparatus, governments have the power to provide supportive funding and other resources. But these collaborative or partnership arrangements often diminish and disempower, as the state appropriates community knowledge/s for its own purposes. Many Group Three projects are positioned to speak about community empowerment and this potentially contradictory role of the (capitalist, colonialist, imperialist) state. In doing so, members recognize that communities themselves are not homogeneous but structured by (among others) gender, class and race relations.

Market forces are also important to many Group Three projects, especially around questions of funding. Several are located in sites where participants are being drawn into/operate within an enterprise (entrepreneurial) culture. There are openings here for individual agency but serious concerns around individualization of responsibility, and the commodification of non-traditional knowledge. Members balanced these concerns somewhat with the recognition that there is also resistance to commodification of (indigenous) culture. At some level, whether or not they explicitly address political activism, all of the Group Three projects have something to say about learning for social change and institutional transformation.

At its broadest, Group Three’s discussion was an attempt to create an understanding of its projects within the context of structures of power. The group
acknowledged that its understanding of formal and informal learning has to do with relations of power, and questions of power/knowledge dichotomies. Burns argued that “the dichotomization of formal and informal learning, and indigenous knowledge and Western knowledge is not a happenstance. It works in the interest of the non-Aboriginal people” and that problem has to be addressed.

Burn’s position on the question of linkages between “informal” and “formal” is that the formal knowledge of the Aboriginal people (that passed along by Elders) has to be “restored, validated or re-validated and asserted through … the public school system.” To quote (and recognize) him more fully:

As an educator and an educational researcher how can we create institutions that are going to embrace diversity, and not just embrace it but allow ourselves to be shaken up by the diversity and develop from that, both in schools and at post-secondary levels. And in other ways too. And that takes us back to that whole notion of what do we mean by this formal versus informal? We create rigid boundaries, yes, and we act on them, but we really need to reconcile some of these aspects as well (Group Three transcript).

Haig-Brown drew a somewhat different conclusion from her involvement with First Nations. A major struggle for her was to “live the contradiction of ‘formalizing’ a program that must retain a level of informality if it is to be true to Aboriginal pedagogy. Even as we develop courses and the program itself, we are trying to keep a level of flexibility and unpredictability that will make it responsive to students, the land with which we live and work, and the teachings themselves.” After spending time on the land:

We quite quickly come to the understanding that as soon as you do something in the school system you’ve compromised the project beyond recognition. What has to happen is that the university has to go to the place. And that’s what we’ve been intentionally doing. When I was on the back of that skidoo I said ‘ha ha York University, bet you never thought you’d find yourself here!’ (Group Three transcript).

Responding to worries about appropriation, Livingstone argued that our task is to empower traditional or subordinated knowledges in such a way that their contents are not totally revealed and vulnerable for appropriation by the dominant forces in society. The issue is:

to decide collaboratively amongst the groups that we’re working with what is going to be most effective in terms of presenting versions of that knowledge that will be empowering internally and more effective in terms of working out relationships with dominant groups in society over the resources that are the rightful due of people. That means demonstrating the competencies of people in generic ways, in terms of showing some of
the kinds of learning that they’re involved in that have been totally suppressed and ignored within workplaces, for examples. But what you do with that knowledge and to what extent it becomes part of any equation with the state including the SSHRC is very much a matter of negotiation with the indigenous groups that each of us as researchers is working with (Group Three transcript).

Still, we are wise to be cautious. After examining the relationships among formal school learning and informal community/home learning practices experienced by Aboriginal youth in Saskatchewan, Wotherspoon and Butler remained concerned about the shifting boundaries between formal and informal learning. “We are dealing with this question in the context of First Nations perspective in which formal education has been very central to processes of colonization. It has excluded traditional heritage and a lot of the Aboriginal experience is not validated.” Some Aboriginal groups are making efforts to gain recognition for indigenous forms of knowledge and ways of knowing. One of the major barriers is that, despite clear conceptual definitions, informal learning remains a slippery concept to apply in institutional educational contexts. (See here also TYP results.)

In the end, Burns’ summary of issues for Group Three may apply to the Network as a whole. He observed that the relations between formal and informal (indigenous and non-indigenous) are “dynamic, dialectical and contradictory.” In terms of strategy, the relationship between immediate concerns and longer-term goals for structural change are vital. As researchers we want to validate and be challenged by indigenous knowledge in its appropriate context but also apply their insights within conventional institutions.

Conclusion

And so we arrive at Contested Terrain: The boundaries and practical impact of informal learning as the theme for the October 2000 conference. I hope that, through this document, the general areas for debate and possibilities for research, program and/or policy action have become clearer – especially for NALL members who have limited exposure to Network projects. I hope that members will take the conference as an opportunity to correct errors, fill in holes, add layers and contribute nuances that will enhance this initial effort to give textual shape to NALL’s communal “we.”

Notes

1. Most of the research for this report was done in the Spring of 2000. Methods included: consultations with key people who are most familiar with the Network’s construction and operation (Network director and administrator etc.); reading project descriptions (particularly the year four reports); reading some individual
papers; participation in the face to face discussions with Groups Two, Three and Five (tapes and transcripts where possible); selected telephone interviews.

2. Members will know that there is a project directed by Peter Sawchuk that deals specifically with Theoretical Foundations of Informal Learning. Some of the issues that I only touch on here will be dealt with in more detail through this mechanism.

3. Note projects focussed on the land including Haig-Brown, Dunk (working class individual’s learning about nature and the environment) and Clover and Hall (daily experience with nature as a source of learning about the environment) in comparison with projects such as those of Schniaid and also Taylor that deal with the impact of new technology.

4. SSHRC was also critical of NALL’s relative lack of corporate partners. Responding to this with respect to Group Six, Jeff Taylor notes that: I am concerned, however, that when the committee suggests that more attention be paid to the needs of the ‘corporate’ sector … what they really mean is that Group Six’s focus on ‘working people’ …. Should be severely diluted. … I would argue against diluting its terms of reference to attract capital. Capital is very well served by other networks and funders dealing with telelearning. The Telelearning Network of Centres of Excellence, which is the largest Canadian research network in the area, is dominated by capital’s preoccupations and values. In addition, only three of the approximately 175 projects funded by the Office of Learning Technologies have had labour participation, while most of the others have ‘corporate’ involvement. And my hunch is that these and other networks and programs are not being criticized by reviewers for courting capital and ignoring labour and other important groups. One of NALL’s strengths is that it has challenged capital’s domination of knowledge creation. One of the ways we have been able to do that is by exploiting the contradictions and openings that exist in the liberal state at the moment. We should continue this by, for example, asking SSHRC to show us that similar ‘balance’ among various social groups is being demanded of other networks. If SSHRC can do that, I’m willing to play the liberal game and allow some involvement in Group Six.

5. As an independent researcher with a range of contracts, for example, I am currently reading about illness and disability; community economic development and the social economy; wedding dresses and material culture; museums and cultural representation; mother/daughter relationships; women’s work, femininity; feminist theory and research methods; auto/ethnography, personal narratives and experimental writing; masculinity and prostate cancer – and of course, informal learning.

6. Most of the projects in Neysmith’s Caring Network used qualitative methods. Writing about this, she notes that qualitative method “can actually be misleading because it often refers only to design or data collection methods and does not
address the more substantive question of a researcher’s epistemology, the framework or theoretical perspective used by a writer for specifying the content and generation of knowledge about our social world” (pg. 12-13). She goes on to point out that qualitative tools are used in all research traditions, frequently by feminist scholars, but that they are not the distinguishing characteristic of feminist methodology. “Feminist methodology shares with the critical school of social research the aim to develop a theory of society that sustains and promotes the possibility of practical action in the service of constructing a fair and just society … knowledge building is directed towards an end beyond the intellectual … (towards) projects of social transformation or changing social conditions….” (pg. 13).

7. Note from David Livingstone on this section: “The dichotomies used here (out there/creating it; integrate/expose differences; doing/learning; voluntary/involuntary/ and more generally between outcomes and processes) are all real enough in the entire corpus of NALL work. There are important political differences in the regulate versus empower roles of informal learning. But we need to be very careful about conflation of these distinctions as well as conflating research methods with political orientations.” I reference this here for further discussion.

8. Note Peter McDougall’s original paper that documents the changes. “The section dealing with “Home Items” in the NALL survey was significantly changed. The title of the “Home Items” section was changed to “Daily Life.” This title change was intended to reflect the fact that the idea of “home” would not be reflective of the lived experience of many of the respondents. Many members of this population either do not have homes or live in situations in which the idea of “home” is tenuous at best. It was believed that “Daily Life” would be a more accurate way to capture this population’s daily lived experience which includes their home/shelter experience” (pg. 4).

9. NALL member Michael Welton notes the philosophical lineage of learning by doing or experience from Aristotle to David Hume to John Dewey. He links the focus on every day life to Habermasian theory of communicative action (1995).

10. John Garrick suggests that the best way to handle the definitional question is by locating informal learning itself under what he sees as the broader category of experiential learning. He draws his support for this from Andersen, Boud and Cohen (1995) who argue that “experiential learning is of particular interest to adult educators because it encompasses formal learning, informal learning, non-formal education, lifelong learning, incidental learning and workplace learning” (Garrick, 1996: 26). The bulk of Garrick’s argument, then, is about experiential learning as a humanistic discourse “whereby learners actively define their own experience by attaching meanings to events” (pg. 31).
11. An interesting cluster of NALL projects deal with informal learning in the context of entrepreneurial initiatives of various types. They include Rachel Gorman’s project (through Working Class Learning Strategies) on work in a disability collective, Butler’s project on Aboriginal youth training for entrepreneurialism, the Dei/Cheddie project on Kensington Market, Meaghan’s project on working safely in the sex industry, the Shragge team’s work with alternative and training businesses, and Stratton’s work on women and community economic development. The contradictions of entrepreneurialism and learning are sub-them of the Network’s work that bears watching, given global trends in this direction.

References

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The Communal ‘We’?

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