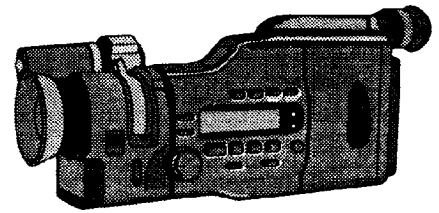


Community video: A route to democratic literacy

The Newfoundland experience



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[The Port au Port Initiative was one of the community learning networks highlighted at the March Forum, p. 12. Newfoundland is often used as a case study on literacy. Their development of community-based media raises some provocative questions about the notions of what counts as literacy. LS]

The process of bridging community learning and communications technology has been happening in Newfoundland and Labrador for about 30 years and is perhaps unique to the culture of this province.

Specifically, we are talking about adult, non-formal, community-based learning. The common ground between learning within a community education context and the methodology of participatory communications is respect for local knowledge and local ways of doing things. Learners and facilitators are peers in a long process of self-development and social awareness. The process mobilizes individuals to analyze and plan for their own future and the future of their communities.

In order to plug participatory

communications into community education, however, it is essential to humanize and demystify the technology. The technology described here is video used in an interactive, participant-controlled local television environment.

Participatory communications in Newfoundland: A 30-year history

In 1967, the Memorial University Extension Service (MUN) and the NFB collaborated on a film project designed to convey the collective voice, in analysis and dialogue, of the people of Fogo Island.

In an early attempt to humanize communications technology, they established principles such as the need for a sensitive film crew. Later during the Port au Choix project, they introduced the "approval screening" where participants in the films were given the opportunity to judge if the film actually represented what they wanted to say.

Today, the "Fogo Process" is known globally in adult education and participatory communications circles. ¹

In 1979, the Extension Service

and its media unit began to experiment with a television transmitter in rural communities. These experiments evolved into phone-in community forums on local issues and needs. Typically the projects began with discussions between field workers and community representatives, which resulted in the media unit bringing in a producer and technicians to pre-tape programming and produce live television in a community hall. Local people appeared on-camera, operated cameras and provided cultural input. This process provided delivery of information to the community and an opportunity for residents to engage in dialogue and plan the future.

Between 1983 and 1989, there were eleven transmitter projects focusing on public discussion of issues facing rural communities. But by the end of the 80s, there was a shift of focus from media technology to popular education — the people took control of the technology.

There were several reasons for this. Financially, the media unit had been eliminated and Extension could no longer afford professional technicians. Technologically, the proliferation of local cable systems meant the technology was already in the community ready to be tapped. Philosophically, there was a move to a popular education methodology.

By 1989, Extension workers had perceived that one danger of using video in a community is that the technology is often controlled by outsiders. With popular education methodology, it is essential that people do their own media. This not only ensures ownership of the process, but in itself develops

Local comments on the 1993 Port au Port Community Forums

A week after the Forum, local residents commented.

- Cecilia Bennett, Piccadilly, said she realized what it is to be a Newfoundlander. "It made me feel as if I had been away from Port au Port for a long time and I just came back."
- Annette Ryan, Port au Port, said it was important that not someone "from the city" but "our own people" were expressing themselves. "We realized we have similar problems."
- Mark Felix liked the involvement of young people. "Such a resource for the future."
- Michelle Jesso appreciated "the fact that it was an opportunity for the community to actually have a voice."