

# PARTICIPATORY EVALUATION AS EDUCATIONAL OUTREACH: WORKING IN UNSETTLING TIMES

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In the context of information and communication technologies in five Newfoundland coastal communities, this article deals with participatory research and outreach. Outreach in these communities, reeling from the near-collapse of the fishery and struggling to survive in a climate of neo-liberal restructuring, is considered to be a holistic educational enterprise involving new technologies and the popular media, schools, and their district officers, clinics and regional health care providers, and children and adults as lifelong learners. Based on five approaches that emerged in the final year of one project -- the work of an on-site liaison, a residential workshop, community workshops, reports through popular media, and contacts with outside organizations -- the author argues that outreach should be recognized as integral to all stages of participatory research.

Key words: educational outreach, participatory research, ICT, coastal communities

Tenant compte des technologies de l'information et des communications dans cinq localités côtières de Terre-Neuve, cet article porte sur les recherches concertées et l'action communautaire. La prestation de services à ces communautés, durement touchées par la quasi-disparition de la pêche et luttant pour survivre dans un climat de restructuration néolibéraliste, est considérée comme une entreprise pédagogique holistique faisant appel aux nouvelles technologies et aux médias grand public, aux écoles et aux membres des commissions scolaires, aux cliniques et aux fournisseurs de soins de santé régionaux ainsi qu'aux enfants et aux adultes apprenant à tout âge. À la lumière des cinq approches qui ont émergé lors de la dernière année de l'un des projets, à savoir le travail d'un agent de liaison sur place, un atelier résidentiel, des ateliers communautaires, des comptes rendus par le biais de médias grand public et des contacts avec d'autres organisations, l'auteure soutient que l'action communautaire devrait être reconnue comme un élément faisant partie intégrante de tous les stades d'une recherche concertée.

Mots clés : action communautaire dans le domaine de l'éducation, recherche concertée, TIC, localités côtières.

Over the twenty years since Lather (1986) declared the importance of educational “research as praxis,” (p. 257), university researchers generally have become increasingly concerned that their conclusions find expression in policy and practice (Lomas, 2000; Pestieau, 2003). For this reason, researchers look to forms of outreach, over and above that customarily disseminated among colleagues through learned journals and conference papers. For participatory researchers, who count among their objectives the need to base their studies on locally identified problems and to achieve a more equitable distribution of goods and services, this outreach takes on paramount importance (Gormley, 2001; Hall, 1996). As with all social research, however, the cultural-economic and temporal contexts of a site are highly significant, both in how research is conducted and in the opportunities afforded researchers, as well as participants, to change their perspectives and circumstances during and after the course of the research.

In this article, I focus on outreach as applied to coastal communities of southwest Newfoundland and the particular intersection of traditional habits with the contemporary need to adapt to neo-liberal trends and/or to challenge their assumptions and practices. By neo-liberalism, I refer to a broad range of economic policies dominated by the market, state policies of reduced spending for social services, curtailment of the collective rights of workers, and an overall movement away from social citizenship to that of “lean citizenship” (Burke, Mooers & Shields, 2000, p. 13) and, most significantly in this case, a population migration from rural to urban localities.

Although rural communities across Canada frequently contend with unsettling times, Newfoundland communities struggle to survive an economic restructuring leading to, and following from, the near total collapse of their major industry: the cod fishery. Also, in a provincial ethos of centralized social services, rural Newfoundlanders fear another period of resettlement to growth centres, such as the one experienced in the 1950s and 1960s.

The participatory research project (2002-2005) that provides the background for this article concerns a community-initiated plan for economic recovery and development through information and communication technologies (ICT), and the tensions between the new

technologies and long-established, traditional ways of doing things. Through a critical feminist lens, the research team concentrated on ICT as they affected education, health care, and small businesses (Clover, 2007; Clover & Harris, 2005; Harris, 2006). This methodological article reflects on how participatory researchers and community activists interwove outreach with research and extended individual and collective learning past the gathering and dissemination of initial findings, into the year 2005-06.

Several assumptions underlie the concept of outreach as it applies to participatory research (PR). The most obvious is that if program evaluation, our<sup>1</sup> original purpose, is to be useful to communities, it must involve a lengthy and comprehensive process among researchers, social activists, and community members. People in rural communities ought to play a large part in the decisions that affect their personal futures and that of their community. Given this goal, we built outreach into our project from the very beginning. A second assumption is that learning is lifelong and multi-dimensional. Therefore, I speak of the teaching and learning that take place not only in schools, but also informally and in other community organizations – in homes, Community Internet Access Programs (i.e., CAP sites), and health care clinics. A third assumption is that any understanding of present conditions, especially in traditional communities, must be based on recognition of historical context. For this reason, and because context is crucial to the success of outreach, I elaborate on the tension that arises, among community members and researchers alike, between traditional ways of being and contemporary expectations.

First, I describe the communities in the context of recent economic and social restructuring, and the technology initiative. Then I give brief overviews of the major findings that were communicated as an ongoing process of outreach, and of traditionalism in the Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) context. Next, I outline five forms of outreach undertaken during the final year of the project. In the discussion, I deal with some of the major issues surrounding educational outreach as applied to living and learning in traditional communities, and end with an acknowledgement that our actions offer first steps only in an exploration

of the kinds of community-university relations that hold promise of lasting change.

#### THE CONTEXT: COMMUNITIES, RESTRUCTURING, AND ICT

The communities of our study fan out from Burgeo, a town of some 1700 people on the south coast of Newfoundland. To the west lies Grand Bruit, a community of 35 in the winter months and approximately 70 when summer residents return and tourists and family members visit. Out to sea some eight miles from Burgeo are the Ramea Islands and the town of Ramea with its 700 inhabitants. Along the coast to the east, and nestled within a river mouth of the same name, lies Grey River and its community of 150. Still further east is Francois, set within another protected inlet, with a similar population. Population numbers, with the exception of Francois which enjoys almost full employment through a diversified fishery, vary widely between the months when people leave to find work elsewhere and the heart of winter, when they return. Burgeo is the only community connected by road to the Trans Canada Highway. The others are accessible by ferry and helicopter, weather permitting, and by snowmobile for some of the winter months.

These rural communities have undergone dramatic restructuring. The fishery has been consolidated, with fishers pressured by governments to sell their licenses or to take early retirement, processing plants have closed, and fishing quotas are now concentrated in large companies. The dominant wisdom, as put forth by governments, holds that there are altogether “too many fishermen [sic] chasing too few fish” (Power & Harrison, 2005, p. 232) and that the industry must fall in line with other forms of rational modernization to trim the inshore fishery, consolidate into large enterprises, and join the global market. This logic, together with over fishing, has resulted in the loss province-wide of some 30,000 jobs on the water and in the plants, an out-migration from these communities of approximately half the population in search of work – often for basic wages and under severe social and physical duress – and with fish stocks still considered to be at risk.

At the same time, social services to all rural areas of Newfoundland and Labrador have been restructured. Using neo-liberal rationales of debt reduction and enhanced efficiency and effectiveness, the Federal

Government in the 1980s reduced equalization, social, and health payments to the provinces, seriously affecting the ability of Atlantic provinces to maintain various forms of infrastructure and economic development (CBC News Online, 2005). As well, the Federal Government lengthened the work period and tightened the regulations for receiving employment insurance. These combined fiscal measures resulted in "fewer jobs, less certain work, and reduced incomes for fish-processing workers" (Neis & Grzetic, 2001, p. 13) and other rural citizens.

Operating under the maxim that "bigger is better," social services provided by the province have undergone equally dramatic restructuring. In education, for instance, administrative districts were consolidated in the mid-1990s from 35 to ten and then, under the government in 2004, from ten to four. The Western District in which this study is located, for example, serves 79 schools and a population of some 14,300 students. As a second example, the Western Health Authority for health and community services (HCS) administers health care and education to a population of some 82,000. This new administrative structure, which has amalgamated HCS from 14 to four boards, according to the Minister of HCS Elizabeth Marshall, "will provide better coordination and planning for the health needs of regions and reduce duplication" (Government NL, 2004, p. 1).

The impact of centralization of decision making and administration has been particularly devastating to small communities of NL. Just when personnel in one school district, development board, or health facility initiate new services, the institution is thrown into the confusion of another structural organization. During my six years in this coastal area, for example, I had to form partnerships with three successive school boards. As a consequence of such instability, individual communities experienced little follow-through on educational initiatives, business planning, or health care schemes.

In response to combined conditions of isolation, a diminished fishery and restructuring, the Burgeo Broadcasting System (BBS)<sup>2</sup> in the late 1990s developed an ICT Initiative to bring video conferencing and high speed internet connections to all five communities. The idea was that these technologies would be used in education, health care, and small

business so that people could carry on and enhance their activities, and still remain at home. To bring this about, a committee was formed in Burgeo to draw up a feasibility plan (ICT, 1999), seek the necessary start-up funding, form supportive partnerships with pertinent organizations, gain the cooperation of the other four communities, and hire technical expertise. Following a lengthy process of establishing partnerships and funding, the BBS by 2001 successfully raised the \$2 million needed to launch their project (News Release, 2001).

Because I had been working in the area for four years prior to this time, and was familiar with the local school system and two of the all-grade schools, the BBS/ICT committee asked me to undertake an evaluation of the Initiative. I agreed to do so, with the provision that the evaluative research take place in a participatory and dialogical manner with extensive input from community members (Hall, 1996), and that women receive special attention in the study – both because they are considered crucial to the development of communities (Fuchs, 2005; Neis, Binkley, Garrard, & Maneschy, 2005) and because of the reputed gender divide in technology (Butler, 2002; Coupal, 2003). With a research team of school and adult educators, graduate students from the University of Victoria, and community activists and partners from NL, I directed a three-year participatory research project (2003-05). The process of participation, however, is rarely straightforward.

#### WHAT IS PARTICIPATORY METHODOLOGY?

Within the discourse of educational reform, considerable confusion surrounds participation. Far too often, participatory claims have obscured an actual consolidation of centralized control, slashed budgets, and a numbers-based approach to curriculum planning and evaluation. Anderson (1998) points out that, despite the rhetoric of parental, teacher, student, and other stakeholder involvement in decision making, much participatory reform is either “bogus, superficial or ineffective” (p. 571). In arguing for authentic participation, Anderson asks three succinct questions of any local context: Who participates? In what do the actors participate? Under what conditions do they participate? In the larger political context, he questions the ends to which people participate, and under what conditions and processes they act (p. 587).

VanderPlaat, Samson, and Raven (2001), similarly concerned with authenticity, point out that the term participatory can mean many things:

At one end of the spectrum are those practices that restrict the concepts of participation and empowerment to techniques that foster the involvement of participants in the evaluation process.... At the other end ... are vastly different approaches that view empowerment and participation within the context of emancipatory politics and the pursuit of collective social change. (p. 80)

Although those who work within existing structures of power and control occupy the former end of this continuum, activists for socio-economic change tend to stand at the latter.

Gormley (2001) outlines five conditions or characteristics for research to fly authentically under the banner of democratic participation. Apart from the identification of research problems by communities and the objective of lessening the gap between present and desired conditions, discussed earlier, Gormley notes that PR is usually rooted in work with marginalized communities, where researchers acknowledge that they are facing power differentials, and that they stand with disadvantaged people. As well, PR calls for group meetings and not just individual interviews; there is an inherent group dynamic or social emphasis. Thus, PR involves collective action "to change existing systems into ones that provide [participants] equal access to power and other resources" (p. 44).

VanderPlaat et al. (2001), in distinguishing between interpretive and action forms of participatory evaluation, make a similar claim. The interpretive evaluator, they contend, "takes on the role of an information broker who describes the different values and needs of those involved" (p. 82). Action-oriented researchers, on the other hand, see themselves as agents of social change with the evaluation itself becoming a tool for this end. The thrust of participation in this scenario is the "recognition that social change can only be achieved through an interplay of human agency (individual and collective action) and social/political structures" (VanderPlaat et al., 2001, p. 84).

Our study falls somewhere near the more emancipatory end of the spectrum. Although we make clear our bias to stand with the communities, and we involve people in the identification of problems

and solutions as much as possible, we were also bound by the terms of our funding body and, more importantly, by the trust of partners, community members, and the BBS to leave the sites better off for our interventions (Harris, 2003). Given these limitations, we believe that overly blunt criticism of decision makers and power brokers would stand little chance of affecting policy.

Our methods of gathering data, and of reaching out to participants, over the initial project involved interviews, observations, and, most importantly, community workshops with teachers, principals, students, parents, health care providers, and other concerned people. Through the first set of workshops, we shared knowledge with the people, telling them about our purposes and plans and, in turn, listening to them speak about what they valued most in their communities, and the problems they encountered with the new technologies. Findings are recorded elsewhere (Clover & Harris, 2005) but, basically, they point to problems – long recognized in development work (Ife, 2002) – that occur when community members are not included in planned change. In this case, the people felt that the ICT did not belong to them, but to those who had installed the technology; not surprisingly, they feared they might damage the new and costly videoconference equipment. Another finding was that teachers and health workers, expected by their organizations to use the videoconference, had received little technical training and no pedagogical preparation. Our task, as outreach workers, was to circulate these and other findings among community members and help rectify the situation. We started this sharing in a second set of workshops, and asked people to suggest uses for the new technologies. This request brought far fewer responses because people seemed unable to explore, imaginatively, a world they had not yet experienced. In the next section, I review briefly the history of a people that underlies this relative silence; the story is both contextual to Newfoundland and, at the same time, not unlike colonial circumstances elsewhere in the Third World (Fuchs, 2005). It is of paramount importance if researchers are to understand the nature of outreach in traditional communities.



### TRADITIONALISM IN CONTEXT

The history of NL involves an early migratory fishery, expansive coastal settlement, a hierarchical and paternalistic social order, educational inequities (between merchant and fisher cultures, and between urban and rural settings), and colonial governance (Ommer, 2002). In the twentieth century, the socio-economic story becomes one of government policies to resettle coastal people in urban growth centres, to privilege large fish plants and trawlers over the inshore fishery and, with over-fishing and the eventual decline of the cod fishery, to encourage economic diversification, re-training of the workforce, and a further consolidation of communities.

Inherent in these social arrangements was a culture of dependency, the root causes of which I have explored elsewhere (Clover & Harris, 2005). First, early settlers brought with them well-established patterns of hierarchical society. For example, within the early Newfoundland communities, local merchants provided fishermen with boats and equipment for their work, and food and supplies for their families. The fishermen, in return, brought their catches to the merchant who processed and sold the fish abroad. This “truck system” persisted in Newfoundland well into the twentieth century (Fay, 1956). Related to this material reliance was the fisherman’s dependence on the merchant’s educational advantage. With inadequate or non-existent schools, many fishermen could neither read nor write past an elementary level, a condition that persists locally today (McCann, 1987; Sawyer, 1998). Szwed (1966), describing one of Newfoundland’s few agricultural districts, notes an “inside/outside” dichotomy, whereby villagers remained rooted in local affairs during their lifetimes while calling on the merchant to intervene with the outer world when an emergency arose. It is hardly surprising, then, that the Newfoundland Royal (British) Commission was able to note in 1933 a phenomenon widespread among Newfoundlanders that

“someone else” is somehow responsible and more capable of making decisions that will affect the common good of the community. Usually the priest, the merchant, or the politician were held to be the most responsible persons, but

responsibility was also seen to extend from the local “outsiders” to those at the top of the government. (Szwed, 1966, p. 161)

Even today, our team cannot view the impact of community resettlement and welfare dependency as separate from the disruption of traditional ways of life. Nor can we view findings about the reliance of fishers on merchant plant owners, and later on international fish companies unusual in light of several centuries of merchant/fisher relationships (Marsden, 2004, pp. 81, 82). Without doubt the most serious blow to coastal Newfoundlanders’ self-esteem and self-reliance, however, was brought about by the 1992 cod moratorium and the economically necessary but socially demoralizing series of re-training programs, make-work projects, and government subsidies to individual former fishers and plant workers.

Whatever the contributors to dependency, the tendency to wait for others to act establishes the major problem we faced as a team of evaluators working with community members to devise new applications for ICT. In the fourth year of research (2005-06), therefore, we engaged broadly in outreach, that heart of participation where we disseminated relevant findings not only within the communities but also among the wider population, promoting institutional and social action as well as individual change (VanderPlaat et al, 2001).

#### EMERGING FORMS OF OUTREACH

Our attempts at increased participation, a full evaluation of which can take place only over the coming years, were based on the expressed wishes of community members and our own desire to see communities shoulder greater responsibility for their own futures. In this section, I discuss five overlapping examples of outreach: the work of a local facilitator, a residential workshop, local workshops, efforts to engage large organizations in the on-going project of community development, and contacts with popular media.

##### *Local Facilitation*

Although we made at least two trips each year to the study sites, we realized in the early stages of research that we needed a full-time community liaison person to bring about any lasting change. In the third

year, therefore, Amy Young, a young woman from one of the communities, joined the team. She came with a degree in Community Development, a strong personal desire to remain in her community, and a desire to see that others have the same opportunity. She visited the communities as needs and opportunities arose. She met with young people in the schools to tell them about her own studies in small business development and opportunities for work within the communities. In this outreach, she attempted to counteract the education traditionally received by rural youth, which follows a prescribed Atlantic provinces curriculum and outcomes-based testing (MacKinnon, 2001), and tends to focus on “leaving” as opposed to staying (Corbett, 2007).

As Amy looked back upon her first year, at the growing uses for technology in the communities, she knew that if she had not “become completely involved, these changes would never have taken place.” She remembers it this way:

I got involved in different committees such as the Community Youth Network [CYN]. There I sit on the board as a youth advocate, and do lots of other things, like drive the community kids to Stephenville for their Annual General Meeting. Any time they need help, I pitch in. First I became involved in organizations, and then I said “these are the things you could be doing [with the videoconference].” You don’t have to be travelling down to Burgeo all the time. (Amy Young, community liaison worker)

I developed a deeper understanding of Amy’s role when I observed a meeting at Grey River between a youth group and their CYN organizer in Burgeo, the young people’s first meeting through videoconference. Although the middle-school students were reluctant to speak out in front of me, and perhaps with the woman from Burgeo who conducted the meeting, they felt perfectly comfortable with Amy in that they spoke through her. Amy, in turn, translated their messages to the CYN leader. We could see by the end of the CYN meeting that the next time would be easier for these young people.

In the communities, Amy noted, people at first seemed to use the new ICT “as a favour to me, but then they see how easy and convenient it is, and begin to see it as a favour to themselves.” In Burgeo, the community at the hub, Amy joined a wide range of committees. On one,

again primarily for youth, she sat with people who were responsible for the entire southwest coast. These committees had all the community leaders such as those responsible for health and community services, the RCMP, the public health and mental health and addictions nurses, the psychology coordinator for the regional integrated authority, and the youth coordinator. This on-site involvement, I believe, went far in bridging the gap between claims and conditions of social service. As Amy said, "It's often written on paper that the service is provided, but really it's not."

#### *The Residential Workshop*

Amy's first task with our team was to visit each site, meet the people, and find out what they would like to see included in a three-day residential workshop. In year three, we decided to launch a workshop based on the Danish folk school model (Harris, 1998, pp. 63-69) where people – we could afford to bring only two from each community – from various backgrounds came together with key presenters, shared experiences, and learned together. Two faculty members from the College of the North Atlantic (CNA), Glenn Kirby and Jim Marsden, became our partners in this venture and the workshop was held near their premises at Stephenville (a large town some 250 km from the communities). These facilitators, on Amy's advice and with the help of other local specialists, developed sessions on community facilitation, library services, web page design, and technology in the service of small business. A representative of the Telehealth and Educational Technology Resource Agency (TETRA) from St. John's spoke to us about applications to primary health care services of telemedicine elsewhere in NL (Dwyer, 2004). For the first time, we all became aware of NL's history of telemedicine and, more importantly, that the south coast had not been included in these services.

Participants at the residential workshop also learned about business starts elsewhere, and about their own successes in light of the larger provincial picture. Response to this workshop, as judged by evaluation forms and personal comments, was enthusiastic. One woman, for instance, said that "the workshop gave me more confidence about myself," while another especially valued this, her first visit to the College

itself, where she was able to meet her son's professors<sup>3</sup> (personal interviews, October 2005). Most participants said that the experience should be extended over longer periods of time and in the communities where more people could attend. In retrospect, I see the workshop as benefiting individuals, and even stimulating personal imagination and action but, like any one form of community development, insufficient in itself to propel social action.

#### *Community Workshops*

One outcome of the residential workshop was the suggestion that the Director of ICT for the BBS, Dave MacDonald, provide community-based workshops on technical aspects and applications of the new equipment. Dave was delighted to comply because community development was part of his mandate, a part that he had previously found little time to pursue. With Amy, he planned and presented several workshops. They remained in each community for two or three days, Dave to trouble-shoot individual problems with computers and videoconference equipment, and Amy to develop more detailed applications of teleconferencing. From these sessions and from individual contacts, Amy facilitated interest and action in using the technologies for church vestry meetings and occasional services, witness statements for the RCMP, the delivery of parenting programs from Family Resource Centres, youth group activities, and health care education. Each use promised to enhance individual lives within the communities, and offered the potential for greater regional cooperation and sharing of resources.

#### *Structural Outreach*

VanderPlaat et al. (2001) recommend, as an important step towards community resilience, that researchers form links with larger organizations of the social service network. In the context of our study, these are the mega-school districts and integrated health care authorities mentioned earlier. At first, my requests for meetings with administrators met with resistance and delays. I gradually became aware, taking the school district as an example, of two stories surrounding these delays. One story, from schools and communities under the jurisdiction of the

District, was highly critical of the organization. Teachers, school administrators, and parents were upset that they could not reach district personnel; their email appeals and telephone messages brought little response.

When I finally secured an appointment (a year after my first probe) with school district officials, I heard a second story as they spoke of the pressures they faced and the “impossible job” of working in “near chaos conditions.” One consultant described hundreds of e-messages coming in each day from the 79 schools. I soon realized that my own task, under these conditions of labour intensification, would be one of applying pressure sufficient to bring the communities to the attention of the large boards, yet not so excessive that I would alienate educators, government employees, and managers.

#### *The Media*

The various contacts we made with the popular press linked people within each of the organizational structures with community interests. A student researcher wrote an amusing story for a magazine popular among Newfoundlanders across Canada (Etmanski, 2005), describing how something as apparently innocuous as a woman’s Monday wash, drying in the sun, could disrupt the direct line reception for Dave’s videoconference. As well, the co-investigator and I met with journalists from daily and weekly papers, and I gave a radio interview and a two public talks. In all articles, interviews, and speaking engagements, apart from Etmanski’s human interest story, our message to the public was consistent. These communities needed the support of the organizations that have contributed to their funding, but have not yet stepped in to play a meaningfully educative role.

Collectively, these contacts evoked responses from the boards and invitations to meet with managers and administrators. Each meeting has facilitated a sharing of perspectives and information, and assurances that the five communities in our project will be included in schemes for rural improvement. Whether or not that comes to pass, I believe, depends on the will and strength of administrative personnel to include rural people in designs and practices that affect their future.

## DISCUSSION

Five topics, each of which affects communication and action, emerge from my reflections on the final outreach phase of this participatory research: a growing technical rationality, the nature of outreach, talk as the work, moving beyond safety zones, and sharing influence and power.

### *Technical Rationality*

One aspect of technical rationality, the inherent logic of ICT, is that all issues become subservient to technique. Thus the equipment becomes the focus of attention, rather than the way these tools change the users' very way of being (Moll, 2001). In all phases of our interaction with community members, we confronted the widespread belief that the focus of ICT projects, both ours and that of the BBS, was to get the technology-as-equipment in place and operative as soon as possible. But this goal marked only the first step in the utilization of new technologies. The team's objective was to stimulate discussion around the equally important uses to which telehealth education and telemedicine might be directed. For example, we explored together with all participants pedagogical issues surrounding the delivery of school health programs by ICT. We also canvassed people's receptivity towards possible contributions to lifelong learning such as lessons in child care, adult education, drug and alcohol abuse, and community safety.

As indicated earlier, rural communities are not served well by the ideology of "bigger is better" or that size equates positively with efficiency and effectiveness. Although mega-organizations may be efficient – and considerable evidence exists to the contrary regarding the complexity of government services (Ferabee, 2007) – it would be surprising to find a school district of the size described here operating effectively. The most damaging aspect of this radical amalgamation of services lies in the broken lines of communication between those delivering services and those served.

Aspects of the current discourse provide yet another impediment to communication. As a new political party gains ascendance, there is the tendency to sweep common words from everyday usage and to replace them with ones of fresh significance (Chan & Garrick, 2002, p. 697). So it

is in NL with the term *regionalisation*. Much insight can be gained from examining words lost from the current lexicon, such as resettlement, amalgamation, or consolidation. I contend that regionalisation has not taken place in the Western School District or within the Western Regional Integrated health services. Rather, urban sites have been favoured, and rural areas neglected. It is quite likely that the effect on rural communities of these mega-institutions will be one of forced resettlement. This contradiction, between claims of greater community control so widely touted by departments of education and health (including those of NL), combined with increased centralization of decision making, marks only one of many tensions between traditional values and ways of being, on the one hand, and technological reasoning and acting, on the other (Harris & Clover, 2004).

#### *Time, Traditions, and Contemporary Needs*

Although outreach was part of our project from the beginning, we now realize that a four-year timeframe was inadequate to address the tensions between the expressed needs of community members and their tradition of waiting for others to act. This non-action was not the case for all the communities, for the five differed markedly in economic wealth, work patterns, and gendered relations of leadership – and in their ability to act. At two sites, women acted forcefully, and often successfully, as spokespersons on issues of transportation, ICT, and schooling (Harris, 2006). At another site, a male school principal led the way in bringing educational issues to the attention of school board personnel. At still another site, committed men attempted –unfortunately with little success so far – to revive the fishery. Although each community had forceful spokespersons, and one or two small businesses, our challenge was to connect the success stories so that people could learn from one another. Success in linking communities that historically competed for fish stocks and outside favours, however, requires a long term commitment on the part of researchers and funding bodies.

#### *The Nature of Outreach*

This research has taught me a great deal about the fine line between work and leisure. When I made preliminary visits to the communities, I



often suffered pangs of guilt that I was only talking with people: sharing cups of tea, trading stories with men and women during the ferry rides, swimming with the children (in July), and talking with fishermen on the wharves. As the trust-building between community members and our team began, and the workshops and interviews got underway, I experienced less concern. As well, Amy's words bring me once more to consider the essence of our work:

It only takes a couple hours to go to one of these places, and first I wondered what to do with my time. A lot of people just want to sit and talk with me. So I do that. You can't go into someone's committee and bring about change without being part of the community. Now I realize there are many committees where I can pitch in and grab the opportunity to suggest an easier way to do things. Mind you, I'm really involved with these communities. I'm there because I want to be there. I'm not just doing a job for this project! (Amy Young, community liaison worker)

These words remind me of Gronn's (1983) classic article on school leadership, in which he asserts that leadership

can take place anywhere. It is time consuming, it observes no set time schedule; and follows no set order or format; for it can arise out of a chance meeting and can include matters that might be routine, spontaneous, trivial, planned or highly eventful. The school principal is a drifter moving in and out of different locations and areas and in and out of relationships and encounters. (p. 19)

So it is, I believe, with our research. In the talk about everyday realities, researchers come to know what is important in the lives of others, and what would make a positive difference to them. Although Gronn portrays administrative talk as "language games" for "performing actions like influencing, persuading, and manipulation" (p. 4), the talk of researchers delves, as well, into the histories, values, desires, and prejudices of others. If authentic, talk both informs and reinforces all parties engaged in the conversation.

A point explored in depth by Garrison (1996) concerns the reverse side of communication, "democratic listening" (p. 429). Such listening goes beyond influencing others to open spaces for new ways of viewing the world. Listening democratically, Garrison maintains, requires

researchers to take personal risks in “reconstructing our [their] social habits in open dialogues across ... differences” (p. 199). The issue of opening oneself to the risk of new ideas applies fully to our researchers and participants alike. As Garrison suggests, we “should deliberate upon all modes of life ... even if ultimately we reject [some] as unable to satisfy our needs and dreams” (p. 199).

Amy’s final three sentences, quoted above, exemplify the core of authentic participation (Anderson, 1998) and, thus, of educational outreach. Amy was involved with the people she met, and not simply in performing work in exchange for payment. The gain she experienced, in this case, inheres in the work itself. To do this work, she – and other participatory researchers – must speak and listen carefully.

#### *Treading New Ground*

Researchers in the social sciences, humanities, and natural sciences alike are coming to recognize the significance of outreach in community-university relationships (Bannister, 2003; Song & M’Gonigle, 2000). The research conducted as part of *Coasts under Stress* – a partner of our project -- extended such relationships by combining the expertise of several universities on Canada’s east and west coasts, and of natural and social scientists in an exploration of the intersection of traditional/local knowledge and scholarly theory (Ommer, 2007). As pointed out by Song and M’Gonigle (2000),

Working with local knowledge requires new skills, including diplomacy and negotiation and a willingness to engage the “other” in a respectful manner over long periods of time. Conventional scientific institutions and training have not provided scientists with the training or support necessary for collaboration with communities. (pp. 986-987)

Reaching out to the public did not come easily to me although, as an academic, I was accustomed to giving papers before peers. I found working with community members informative and exhilarating, but public outreach demanded a political dimension for which I was unprepared. I had to develop the personal confidence not only to present my findings as significant to local people, but also to persevere in the face of delays and resistance. As with the users of videoconferencing,

however, my ease with these new approaches increased over time and with experience. In this way, I can see my own slow progress from dependency on the familiar, to action.

### *Power Sharing*

To democratize the researcher-participant relationship, I have tried not to lose sight of where the power lies at any given place and time. As others have pointed out, power and resistance work at all institutional layers, and not always in accordance with the knowledge held (e.g., Foucault, 1980; Sinclair & Ommer, 2006). Participatory researchers should not become so overly critical of their ability to wield power that they become immobilized for the structural changes they can bring about. For example, I believe I have played an important role in communicating with district educational organizations and provincial health care planners. As a team, we have addressed cases of individual need, such as courses and materials missing in schools. We also reported on general conditions and lobbied for the inclusion of the five communities in provincial and regional health initiatives. Because we believe with Battcock (2005), for instance, that an effective NL telehealth strategy requires training for health care professionals, technical staff, and clients (pp. 26, 27), we added our voice to her recommendations with specific reference to NL's southwest coast. These cooperative connections would be difficult for community members to identify and initiate. On the other hand, our attempts to affect policy and action would get nowhere without support from the people themselves. For us, there were meetings to arrange with provincial planners, press releases to prepare, and arguments to fine tune. For community members, there were community and regional meetings to hold, plans to initiate, phone calls to make, and letters to write. For us all, there were habits to question, challenge, and perhaps move beyond.

### CONCLUSION

I have outlined several obstacles we faced in participating and conducting outreach with traditional communities as they encountered new ways of thinking and being. Primary among them was the reluctance to abandon familiar technologies in favour of those that

spelled difference and the unknown. In many ways, university researchers and communities face similar tensions. The old ways of doing things are being questioned. In our participatory evaluation and outreach, as we moved beyond the relative safety of working within the communities and writing up our findings, to venture into the political arena, we came to question our own dependency on those things that always counted in the academic world. We have in the past, after all, formed our identities through writing and teaching, i.e., through communicating with one another. Outreach requires that we seek new audiences.

In the course of our research, of which the political thrust was to bridge traditional and contemporary values, we became aware of many traditions that worked positively towards collective goals. The people of these communities were closely knit, with strengths of kinship, religious unity, solidarity, and endurance. Coastal communities, moreover, call on several hundred years of hardship on the sea, a keenly developed sense of place, and a determination to survive. Technologies may allow them to live more easily and to stay longer, perhaps long enough for others to discover the advantages of rural ways of being.

Meanwhile, our attempt to adhere to Gormley's (2001) definition of participation, particularly the challenge to lessen the gap between desired and present conditions – economic and communicative in this case – led to several new and fruitful areas of participatory outreach. One surrounds the success of workshops, both community-based and residentially town-based. Through both workshop formats, researchers, local educators, and community members engaged in a mutual exchange of important information about community priorities and ICT, an exploration of local culture, the building of confidence in aims and objectives, and the development of a shared vision for the future. The large numbers and outspoken leadership of women, in particular, at workshops and other community meetings led me to recognize their growing resistance to the dependency and paternalism that has stifled progress in outport NL.

Another form of outreach, recommended by VanderPlaat et al. (2001) as crucial to positive outcomes, involved my attention to structural change. My meetings with provincial school and health care

organizations, although during too brief a period in our research, began the conversations that link government agents with isolated communities. A third, highly beneficial form of outreach was with the popular media. This outreach, of course, is context-specific and knows few restrictions. For us, newspaper and radio reports formed the core communication links and are on-going at the time of writing this article (e.g., Porter, 2007). Etmanski's (2005) article probably reached more people, informing them of our presence and purposes, than any other form of communication. Finally, Amy's presence as an on-site worker, too, came late in the research but was recognized by all as a highly valuable addition to the team's ability to maintain communication with community members and stimulate action. Each of these last three forms of outreach – to large organizations, to the popular media, and directly to communities – began at a late stage in our participatory evaluation. In future, these or similar tactics should be included in the research planning, implemented sooner, and expanded greatly.

Overall, I believe we have made a difference to people's awareness of their ability to shape their futures, and we have alerted outside agencies to possible roles they might play in ensuring community resilience through appropriate uses of new technologies. Although issues raised in the present study – particularly the conflict between traditions of staying and demands to relocate – are repeated on each coast of Canada and in many other rural areas, this story of community resilience in the face of socio-economic dependency remains a work in progress.

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I am also deeply indebted to the people of these five communities who welcomed researchers into their homes, organizations, and lives and who shared with us their hopes and fears about the future of outport life.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Although I author this article, I speak also of “us” and “our” thoughts and actions. Pronouns of the first person plural refer to agreements among research team members, and to collective action.

<sup>2</sup> The town of Burgeo was an early pioneer in what E. Harris (1992) refers to as “narrowcasting.” The not-for-profit Burgeo Broadcasting System (BBS) since the 1970s has provided television services to the town, and a station specifically dedicated to the delivery of local news and entertainment.

<sup>3</sup> One can hardly overestimate the importance of familiarizing outport parents with the outside environments experienced by their sons and daughters. Without this understanding, students are not only educated to leave (Corbett, 2007), but also are less likely, upon their return, to find an empathetic social environment.

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