EXPANDING THE CONCEPT OF LIFELONG LEARNING BEYOND THE CAMPUS: The Experience of the McGill Community for Lifelong Learning within the Wider Quebec Community

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Abstract

Since 2009, the McGill Community for Lifelong Learning (MCLL), a program of the McGill School of Continuing Studies (SCS), has been actively involved in outreach programs to the larger Quebec community. MCLL's peer learning process ensures that local participants are involved in co-creating their own educational experience. In cooperation with Quebec's Community Learning Centres (CLCs), MCLL assisted in developing three older adult peer learning initiatives—in Lachute, Saint-Lambert, and Quebec City. In practice, MCLL volunteers explain and illustrate the MCLL model to members of the CLC communities, demonstrating how participants learn from each other through research and discussion. Where appropriate, MCLL moderators/instructors used videoconferencing and workshops to connect with leaders from the various regions for planning and support.

This paper describes the challenges and rewards of integrating a volunteer-led lifelong learning program in diverse community settings. By examining what has been achieved and how it has been accomplished over a four-year period, the paper considers the successes of this collaboration and looks into areas of future expansion.

Keywords: lifelong learning, communities of practice, community development

Introduction

The McGill Community for Lifelong Learning (MCLL) is a peer-to-peer educational community in the McGill University School of Continuing Studies (SCS). After 25 years, MCLL is a thriving learning community and home to hundreds of senior learners who, amongst other things, engage in study groups developed for and by themselves.

This paper presents the MCLL model and its origins. It also documents an ongoing collaboration between MCLL and the Community Learning Centers Initiative of Quebec as well as the evolution, successes and challenges stemming from this collaboration.

The McGill Community for Lifelong Learning

History

MCLL has its roots in the Canadian Association for University Continuing Education (CAUCE) Annual Conference. In 1983, Fiona Clark was the assistant director for the McGill Centre for Continuing Education (CCE). That year, Clark attended a CAUCE conference on the theme of seniors' education, and developed a link with the coordinator of the Seniors' Studies Program at Ryerson University[1]. This led to some preliminary forays in educational programming for seniors, and in the spring of 1985, the CCE ran two spring courses of four weekly sessions[2].

In 1988, Clark again attended a CAUCE conference and was introduced to peer-to-peer learning[3]. A working group made up of senior citizen students was subsequently established in the fall of 1988 with the goal to evaluate the model used by the Harvard University Institute for Learning in Retirement[i]. It was after exchanges with Harvard that its model, which prioritizes peer-led study groups and the development of a semi-autonomous educational community, was adopted by McGill University. In the fall of 1989, McGill held its first semester of the Institute for Learning in Retirement[4].

Current Status and Format

The core of the MCLL model is its peer learning approach, which encourages members to take a participatory role in study groups. Every semester, members can choose from 30 to 50 study groups on topics that include art, music, culture, literature, history, politics, health, and science. Study groups typically last 10 weeks during the fall, winter, and spring terms and are made up of 10 to 25 participants. Informal leadership is provided by peer moderators: members of MCLL who started as participants. Some study groups include paper presentations—either on the group topic, relevant cultural events, or personal life experiences. Presentations are recommended, but not required. The only requirement is participation in group discussion. MCLL currently describes its programming thusly:

> MCLL programs are for people of retirement age who want to continue learning for the joy of it, and share their knowledge, ideas and experience with others. Whatever your interests or educational background, if you are intellectually curious you will enjoy expanding your knowledge with others in a friendly and stimulating environment. You will also make new friends and have the satisfaction of being a student again in the surroundings of a famous university—with no exams![ii]

> Key to MCLL's sense of community is the commitment of members who, in addition to attending study groups, contribute their time in other ways. Members are moderators and

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[1] Subsequently, the decision to develop a similar program at McGill was made and an advisory committee was struck.

[2] The courses were given by McGill University professors and cost $60 per participant.

[3] by peers from the University of British Columbia to the Harvard University and University of California, Los Angeles

[4] Prior to this, intensive internal discussions had taken place and a workshop and visioning session had been organized amongst the senior students of the Centre. Four hundred people had attended.

lecturers, serve on the elected Council and committees, and help take care of many administrative tasks. ("McGill Community," 2013)

The MCLL membership fee is $100 per term. In addition to taking part in study groups, members may also attend lectures and social events in the year following their registration, as well as access the McGill Libraries.

Organizational Structure

In some respects, MCLL resembles a community organization. It has its own organizational mandate, bylaws, and membership; it also holds an annual general meeting where members vote on organizational issues and elect a representative Council.

There are 15 members on Council. In addition to a president, vice president, the previous president, a secretary and treasurer in addition to which there are nine Council members who each chair a committee. Numerous other volunteers are also involved with MCLL: committee members who help develop program initiatives, study group moderators and lecturers and the office staff volunteers who help McGill staff manage the daily organizational tasks.

Relationship to the McGill University School of Continuing Studies

The McGill School of Continuing Studies (SCS) views MCLL as an integral part of the School. According to SCS Dean Judith Potter, there is a "strong connection between [MCLL and] the School's philosophical base and [the two are] a natural fit" and that "the literature clearly demonstrates the benefits of staying active; the positive impact that [the community] has". Dean Potter stresses the importance of "recognizing the baby boomer population and to include them in our mission" (personal communication, May 8, 2013).

McGill University provides MCLL with access to a suite which includes four well-equipped seminar rooms as well as a common room, an office and a small kitchen. McGill also provides assistance from staff in the carrying out of tasks including ordering, installation, and maintenance of IT and audio visual equipment; marketing and public relations support; financial coordination; development assistance; and maintenance of the space. As an academic unit of the school, MCLL also has access to the McGill resources outside of the School of Continuing Studies.

Other Programs and Collaborations

MCLL presents a broad slate of educational programming in collaboration with other groups on or off campus.

Through the SPEAK Program, members of MCLL act as peer resources for international students According to Dean Potter, it is important for the SCS to "create links [to MCLL] so that it is not an isolated group. The SPEAK program, which links foreign students to MCLL mentors, is one example" (personal communication, May 8, 2013).

MCLL members also offer outreach to seniors' residences throughout the Montreal area on a per-demand basis.

MCLL regularly collaborates with other McGill units including the Hidden Gems project, initiated by the McGill Social Equity and Diversity Education Office[iii] during which student writers are paired with MCLL members and write a radio play of the members' lives, which were then broadcasted.

Finally, MCLL encourages the development of member-led initiatives. One example is Bloomsday, the annual worldwide celebration of the James Joyce novel *Ulysses* which has been commemorated annually in Montreal through MCLL since 2012[5].

Quebec Community Learning Centres Initiative

The Outreach Project

Having established the foundations of MCLL and its approach to peer learning, the remainder of this paper explores the development of a collaboration between MCLL and the Community Learning Centres (CLCs) on an outreach project to the wider Quebec community.

In 2009, as part of the MCLL 20th Anniversary celebrations, the MCLL Council applied for a government grant[6] to promote peer learning through a series of lectures given by MCLL moderators to several English-speaking minority communities in Quebec. A CLC coordinator was present when the lecture series was proposed to Voice of English-speaking Québec, a Quebec City community organization. This coordinator believed that the Community Learning Centers would benefit from a similar initiative and began the process of setting up peer learning groups, eventually coming to MCLL to witness how this was taking place in Montreal. Through this first contact with the CLCs, members of MCLL realized that a collaborative relationship was a natural fit for the two organizations.

The Community Learning Centres

The CLC initiative[iv] was designed to support the vitality of Quebec's English-speaking minority language population by providing schools with a range of services and activities to help meet the needs of learners, their families and the wider community. Funding for the initiative comes through the Roadmap for Canada's Linguistic Duality, through Canadian Heritage's entente with Quebec's *Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport* (Ministry of Education, Recreation, and Sport).

Beginning with 15 Centres in 2006, the initiative has grown to include 37 CLCs distributed amongst 11 school boards in almost all geographic regions of Quebec. Centres are located in urban, suburban, rural and isolated communities, in elementary schools, high schools, and adult education centers. Each CLC engages stakeholders and partners in determining its

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[5] Bloomsday Montreal takes place throughout the downtown core at McGill as well as at Concordia University in collaboration with the School of Canadian Irish Studies, and in other cultural establishments such as the McCord Museum, the Atwater and Westmount Libraries, and some Montreal Irish pubs.

[6] The New Horizons for Seniors Program offered through Human Resources and Skills Development Canada.

mission, vision, and priorities. From the onset, working with partners to make lifelong learning opportunities accessible in communities has been an important aspect of what CLCs do.

CLC network coordination is overseen by a Provincial Resource Team—in the case of this collaboration with MCLL, a liaison from that team was introduced to the MCLL representatives and at the meeting that followed, several volunteers expressed passionate commitment to helping seniors in more isolated areas reap the benefits of the peer learning model. There began an ambitious project using videoconferencing to connect with CLCs in the regions.

Meeting Joint Goals in Lifelong Learning

The intended outcome of the MCLL-CLC collaboration was to foster a culture of participant-led lifelong learning in the regions; the impact, a more vibrant and connected community. Six of the more isolated CLC locations were chosen, and seven videoconferences (VCs) were planned over 2009–2010 to introduce the model. MCLL held three VCs and then reluctantly halted the project because members realized that the communities were not engaging with the initiative as they had hoped. Upon reflection, stakeholders determined that they needed a different approach, that a successful project required personal contact and to experience a study group in action. MCLL members also realized that the model must be adapted to suit the realities of these isolated communities, which with their small populations, were not large enough to create study groups on individual topics.

Having learned what did not work, MCLL and the CLCs continued to seek ways to introduce the model in communities. One initially successful peer learning group was set up in Chateauguay after MCLL members visited the site[7] to demonstrate the model. One of the MCLL moderators facilitated a first study group in Chateauguay in the fall of 2009: "Write the Story of Your Life" which has since grown exponentially. However, the organizers had difficulty sustaining members' active participation in co-creating their learning experiences. Although the program continues to exist, it no longer uses a peer learning model. "How-to" classes are now held using a teacher-led approach. While the outreach failed to establish peer learning programming, the underlying purpose of serving adult learners was nevertheless achieved.

In Quebec City, following their visit to MCLL during a CLC conference in 2009, and using funding from Canada's New Horizons for Seniors Program, several community organizations collaborated to launch a peer learning initiative based on the MCLL model[8]. Favorable conditions in this urban area included strong relationships amongst organizations serving the English-speaking population to support the implementation and continuation. Population size, proximity, and access to transportation also facilitate participation.

In 2010, a Saint-Lambert group was spearheaded by two experienced moderators from MCLL who worked in collaboration with the CLC located at St. Lambert Elementary School,

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7 The first meeting with the potential Chateauguay group took place on January 22, 2009
8 This initiative in Quebec was initiated by representatives from various community groups who collectively administered the obtained funds. Activities were planned after a second visit to MCLL on May 5 2010. Since then, the partners involved have shifted and the groups are now coordinated by the local literacy council.

located in a small urban community on the south shore of Montreal. The proximity to McGill was beneficial. The first study group explored a science-based topic, which the moderator was also facilitating at MCLL, called "Oh, My Brain!" With minimal promotion, the group attracted more than 20 participants and was a resounding success[9]. Having strong moderators ensured that participants truly engaged in peer learning and the Saint-Lambert CLC now works with volunteer representatives to offer five or more different topics in each of its fall and winter sessions[10].

The latest addition to this network of peer learning communities was established in 2012 in Lachute, the center of a large farming community outside of Montreal, with isolated pockets of English-speaking individuals as potential members. One challenge in Lachute was the travel distance required of participants. Another was choosing a relevant topic for the community. "The "History of Lachute" was presented as the first study group topic and attracted half a dozen participants for six-weeks. The program was advertised by word of mouth, the CLC website, as well as through personal community contacts.   The second study group attempted was "Creative Writing." This group lost participants because the moderator used more of a lecture style, an outcome that emphasizes the importance of offering moderator training. For a future session topic, they are watching various TED Talks[v] and discussing the content in a group. This participatory activity reflects how some of the study groups at MCLL are structured.

Leading Lifelong Learning Symposium: Initiating Participatory Study Groups

Once these programs were in place, CLC and MCLL stakeholders met and decided that an event was needed to compare all the experiences of new groups and share successes and challenges. A forum was held in Montreal on November 19, 2012, to bring together people from the regions who had already set up or were contemplating initiating peer learning groups, as well as Montreal community organizers and individuals interested in this model of learning.

The Leading Lifelong Learning Symposium drew approximately 60 participants who took part in sessions including a simulated study group to demonstrate the MCLL model, followed by facilitated discussions on peer learning. Two workshops were offered—one on creating and promoting participatory learning groups and another on the art of moderating.

The symposium generated interest to form groups in other areas, one of which had been established in Lake of Two Mountains..

Developing Peer learning Groups in Collaboration with a Community Partner

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[9] Three years later, in focus-group discussion, participants still recall presentations given by other members of their group on such topics as Alzheimer's and autism. They were able to connect with the topic, making meaningful connections with it personally and as a group.

[10] There has continued to be a science-based topic in every subsequent session. Participant retention has been high over the three years since the initiative was launched. The organizers would like to see more of the potential participants reached and more sites added on the South Shore. Promotion and communication are challenging with limited budgets—the participants are charged a small fee to cover CLC support staff costs for their meeting needs.

What follows are general steps involved in setting up and maintaining peer learning groups outside of an academic institution, in collaboration with a community partner.

First, it is essential to ensure the continued support of the host academic institution. In the case of MCLL, Dean Potter supported the collaboration since its beginning and she went with a group from MCLL to learn more about the CLCs and to see what was possible in terms of technology. Finally, the MCLL council has in the past allocated funds to make visits to various centers possible, defraying travel expenses on occasion.

The next step is to find a viable community partner. In the case of MCLL, the CLCs have been helpful in that they have established meeting places that can be used for peer learning groups. This will not necessarily be the case in other provinces. However, libraries often run social and educational programs, and attract a literate public interested in forums to explore topics of interest[11]. A first step can be to have someone from the academic program give a lecture in the community explaining the process of peer learning. Such an initial exchange may allow for the identification of local individuals who may be able to act as champions for a collaboration in its infancy.

Based on the MCLL-CLC experience, champions in the community are a critical component for initiating a community-based continuing education program for seniors. Staff and volunteers at MCLL have found that creating peer learning groups in a community has to come from within. The champion will get others interested in the idea and will contribute to its initial successes by spreading the word[12]. In all likelihood, these individuals will be the first moderators, or facilitators, and they will lead by example.

Finally, the choice of topic for the first study group is crucial. It must be something that has wide appeal for people in the area and does not appear too overwhelming to potential members. Examples have been provided throughout this report of practice.

Benefits of Lifelong Learning Programs

What are the benefits of community outreach program for lifelong learning?

After two years of intensive collaboration, members of MCLL conducted an inquiry with the CLC communities to elicit their reflections on how the model has benefited them. CLC and MCLL representatives were able to visit the sites in Lachute and Saint-Lambert to meet with participants and organizers for interviews and focus groups. The Quebec City group was unable to organize a visit but did provide written feedback to the questions asked.

Using the MCLL model for CLC communities included a number of benefits. For one, the participants experience the learning format as conducive to building social connection and

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[11] The same process could be used through a community center, a community organization such as the Elks or Lions Club, or a school board attracting adults to adult education programs. A partner organization that works with seniors may be helpful in terms of funding if you are establishing a program from within a university.

[12] Word of mouth was in our experience the best way of increasing and maintaining membership. An additional source of advertising such as the library or community center's website or newsletter can also be beneficial.

intellectual curiosity. They report that these benefits extend beyond the time that they spend in the group meetings, that their experience encourages them to read more and reflect outside the group on the discussion topics. They also improve their skills, using the Internet and other tools to research topics of interest more. They connect with others socially with whom they may not have had any previous interaction, and these relationships often extend beyond the time spent in the group.

For another, the presence of these groups in schools has provided an opportunity for students to observe older adults engaged in learning and has brought the participants in contact with the school community. Relationships have been strengthened across generations that have tended to isolate from one another. The CLCs have been able to leverage the access to older adults to introduce other opportunities for intergenerational exchange that are mutually beneficial. Participants and organizers are proud to report that they are creating a culture of lifelong learning in their communities.

This collaboration with the CLCs has provided MCLL with several opportunities. This has included the chance to connect with and learn from a broad and well-developed community network whose mandate, while similar to its own, also expands in different areas including community building at local and regional levels. It has also new people in towards MCLL for the purpose of participation and educational co-learning and created the conditions for the production of academic research, in preparation for the November 2012 symposium and for a presentation at the 2013 CAUCE Annual Conference.

Future Directions

A few next considerations are still in progress surrounding MCLL's role in Quebec's community. While MCLL has introduced the model to CLCs, the extent of MCLL's ongoing support of CLCs that have adopted or wish to adopt this methodology needs to be considered. Unfortunately, organizational capacity has limited MCLL's ability to consistently maintain support for the initiative.

The CLC communities are continuing in their development, supported by their local CLC coordinators, champions, and organizing structures. Hopefully, the initiative will continue to flourish in the existing committees based on the unique value that the peer learning experience offers to participants.

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