



Of all the rural learning groups we looked at, the one about the fisheries, sponsored by the Bay of Fundy Marine Resource Centre (MRC), certainly has the widest range of education levels among its participants. Some have Ph.Ds, some have some post-secondary education, some have a few years of high school and some have no high school education. There is a similar range in terms of their backgrounds: about half the group is fishermen, and the rest are a mix of academics and community development workers. What they share is their interest in fisheries, and specifically fisheries policy. They originally came together as a group for a very specific reason: to discuss a recent study about the privatization of the groundfish fishery in Southwest Nova Scotia. When the book first came out, a copy was circulated around the MRC, resulting in some animated discussions about both its perspectives and its findings. It describes a process that has had a major effect on the local fisheries and communities, and some people, who had been amongst those affected by these changes, disputed the version of events given in the book. Others pointed out that only certain people had been interviewed for the book, and others had been left out. At some point someone said, “What we need to do is sit down with a group of fishermen, university people and community members to talk about his book.” From there the MRC made a few phone calls, and started convening the group, which has met roughly on a monthly basis since then.

Since its inception, the group has gone through a series of rapid changes. Initially each person would read a chapter of the book and summarize it to the group and discussion would follow. These discussions were often animated, since they involved strongly held opinions about the Federal Government’s management and privatization of the fishery. After a couple of these meetings, the discussion broadened out to include the larger topic of social science, and how it relates to the fisheries. This centered on the question of who is telling the story of what happened to the people of the region, and how so many voices can be excluded from that story. This led to the next phase where the participants decided to invite some of the people who were part of the process of privatization of the groundfish in the early 90’s, to come and talk to the group. The first guest was Dr. John Kearney from the Saint Francis-Xavier University Centre for Community-Based Management to join the group for one session, so that they could “interview” him. John had been a representative of the Maritime Fishermen’s Union in the early 90’s, and was “at the table” during the negotiation of quota systems. At this meeting, one of the fishermen brought along a piece about privatization that he had written, and there was

discussion of this as well. This led to the suggestion that the group become a “writing group”, where people could bring some writing for discussion. This seemed to be part of the larger process of “telling our side of the story.” The group’s composition also changed as it went forward. New participants joined in, broadening the range of the discussion. For example, the former Chief of the Bear River First Nation, who is also an adult educator, joined the group, adding a key critical perspective. Thus, in a period of less than a year, the group has made a number of quick transitions, based on participants’ interests and objectives.

This group poses a number of interesting questions relating to learning circles. How can groups function with an extremely wide range of educational levels? Can a learning group be entirely self-directed, without a formal learning program? What is the relationship between a high motivation for meeting and learning, as demonstrated by this group, and a high motivation to make social or political change? What happens, from an adult education perspective, when we make research itself the subject of research, when we turn the tables, and have the people who are being researched suddenly become the researchers?

Before getting to these questions, though, there are some essential pieces of background context that should be filled in. These take the form of three stories about what has happened in the fisheries in Southwest Nova Scotia. The first is about the federal government policy of privatizing the fisheries; the second is about community-based management; and the third is about community capacity-building, and the emergence of the MRC.

Digby and Annapolis Counties are located on the Nova Scotia side of the Bay of Fundy. It is a very rural area - the biggest town, Digby has less than 2,000 people. The rest of the population is mostly scattered around small coastal fishing villages (except for the Annapolis Valley, which is Nova Scotia prime farming area). These communities are almost entirely dependent on the fisheries for their existence. This has changed somewhat over the last few years with the downturn in the groundfishery and the increase of service jobs in big box stores, as well as new jobs in a major call centre. But fisheries are still a big industry here. This has always been a multispecies fishing area - lobster, groundfish (cod, haddock, pollock), scallop and herring. These fisheries are divided into a number of sectors:

- Groundfish fixed gear - A fleet of about 150 under 45-foot boats that fish mostly using hook and line, or in some cases gillnet. These boats are owned and operated by inshore fishermen and generally have 1-3 crew aboard.
- Groundfish mobile - About 25 fish draggers, with about three crew each, entirely owned by fish processing companies.
- Scallop - the famous Digby scallop fleet made up of about 30 - 40 scallop draggers, now mostly owned by companies.

- Herring - a fleet of herring seiners, owned by companies, mostly in the Clare region.
- Lobster - about 200 under 45-foot lobster boats that fish with lobster trap during fixed season. This fishery is owned and operated by individual fishermen and is the most successful fishery in the region.

The main difference in the way these fisheries are managed has to do with quota, which determine the fishery's access to the resource. The lobster and the fixed gear groundfish fishery are fished by under 45-foot boats that are mostly owner operated small enterprises, that is the fishermen work on the boat and own the enterprise. The lobster fishery has no quota, but is managed through "effort control": tightly regulated trap limits, seasons and fishing areas. Groundfish fixed gear is managed according to community quota. The mobile groundfish, scallop and herring fleets are quota based. They use a system of Individual Transferable Quotas (ITQs), in which quotas are attached to licenses and can be bought and leased. These fleets are all company owned, by a handful of companies in the area.

This system of privatizing the quota is really the key background issue for this learning circle. Many fishermen and community members believe that Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) has deliberately set out to put the fisheries in a few corporate hands, to the detriment of inshore fishermen and the coastal communities they support. There is good evidence for this, starting with the Kirby Report that called for this approach in 1984, right through the 80's and 90's. This resulted in the introduction of privatized quotas in the herring, scallop and mobile groundfish fisheries. In each case it has resulted in the concentration of ownership in a few corporate hands. In 1995 it looked as though this system would be brought into the inshore fishery as well. This would have had a devastating effect on the local inshore handline and longline boats. As a result there was a massive protest throughout Southwest Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. By the time it was done, most federal fisheries offices had been occupied for more than a month. The communities also rallied in support of the fishermen in many local protests and the biggest protest march in the history of Halifax. The outcome of all of this was a mediation process, which resulted in community quotas. Each county, or region was allocated a community quota to shared by the fishermen.

In the Bay of Fundy region this resulted in the creation of the Fundy Fixed Gear Council (FFGC), which was the management board for the Nova Scotia side of the Bay of Fundy. The FFGC set up a system of democratic self-governance that included managing the quota as a common community quota, as well as compliance, harvesting and science. Increasingly, it became clear that there was also a need to answer social science questions about fleet profiles, economics, and fisheries policy. The FFGC was also involved in training and education providing a number of workshops and learning opportunities to its members.

It was to support community-based management that the Marine Resource Centre was formed. It was created by an alliance of the local economic development authority and the FFGC to provide support to local organizations that were involved with community-based management. Their mandate included capacity building, organizational development, education, information and referral services, and research and conflict resolution. In some ways the Marine Resource Centre is like a switchboard for local fishermen groups. They can plug into it and access a wide range of support fundraising, technical expertise, such as Geographical Information Systems map making and board development. The MRC also plays a role in the community as “a safe place”, where groups can get together and resolve differences. This had a major role, for example, after the Supreme Court’s Marshall Decision, when there was great potential for conflict between First Nations and non-native fishing communities in the region. The education role has also been central to the Marine Resource Centre’s work. It has hosted a wide range of conferences and workshops on topics such as participatory research, health and safety, and other marine-related topics. It was natural, therefore, for the Marine Resource Centre to bring together the Fisheries Discussion Group.

Although this background is an oversimplification of a complex and long-term series of events and issues, it does provide the essential context for the group. This context is essential to understanding what makes this group tick. The participants have a shared interest and involvement in fisheries issues that inform all the learning, including the reading and writing that happens in the group. The question of privatization of the fisheries, and the development of community-based management as an alternative, is of intense interest to every person around this table. In addition to this there is a shared interest in “telling our own story” and “setting the record straight” about what has happened in the fisheries in the area.

These shared interests and commitments cut across the group’s diverse make-up. One of the most interesting features is the mix of different backgrounds and education levels: some are active inshore lobster and groundfish fishermen, some are community development workers, one is a retired fishermen, one is a retired DFO scientist and one is a provincial employee. As mentioned, their education levels cover a wide range. It is important to note that this is not a volunteer tutoring situation, where those with more education are teaching those with less. This kind of learning dynamic has never emerged in the group. Rather all of the participants, from their different perspectives, come to the group with an interest in learning. This is not to say they all come to the group to learn the same things, but rather that they share an interest in taking a critical look at texts relating to the impact policies.

The learning objectives of the individuals and group as a whole have also been dynamic and changing since the group’s inception. Every session has included a discussion that starts with the question “what are we doing here anyway?” Each of these discussions has led to new ideas for group activities. To date it seems to have gone through three phases:

(1) *Meeting to discuss the book in question.* This included a conversations about how to proceed. This led to a decision to each read one chapter and bring back a summary for discussion (one session). Spoken summaries of the chapter were followed by discussions (two sessions).

(2) *The invitation of a “guest speaker”, someone who was involved in the processes discussed in the book.* The purpose of this was to conduct a group “interview” to get his side of what happened. The MRC transcribed the interview, which led to another discussion. This interview was of great interest to the group, because it presented a very different version of the process of meetings and negotiations that led to the introduction of ITQs in the groundfish fishery. Far from being a fair and open process, as described in the book, the testimony showed that it was in fact fraught with manipulation, deceit and intimidation. There was even a detailed description of a death threat that was made during one of the meetings. Much of the discussion centred around how to have a voice in these kinds of studies. As one participant put it, “We need to tell our own stories.”

(3) *After the discussion of the transcription of the interview, one fisherman in the group brought some writing of his own.* The first piece of writing was by one of the fishermen. It described the effect of ITQs from a handliner’s perspective:

[with] the threat of ITQs, many things would change as we once knew in terms of liberties and freedoms, rights, privileges, laws and a whole whack of items of betrayal involving top down government and corporations. All the secrets of top down government aim to protect corporate and foreign investment through ... the use of licensing that was meant to wipe out our attachment involving the fisheries, which continue. Fish continue to decline not because boats are racing to get the biggest catch - if that were the case we would have had access or would have draggers or gillnetters better known as ghost nets. Say anything DFO will say gear conflict we have a bunch of madmen on our hands.

He goes on to describe the negative effect of this conflict on a personal and community level.

It’s not a good experience dealing with the foes of our communities nor the higher powers of government and the United Nations and of bureaucracies. But why do I sometime feel like a puppet on a string. I don’t think anyone could possibly know what it is like to walk in my shoes ... My life will never be the same again, to live the rest of my life doing what I’ve been trying to do for the community ... I know that the wise and prudent have used our weaknesses and our vulnerabilities of greed, the opportunities to sell ourselves out, envy, strife and all categories of division ...

He goes on to connect what has happened in this region to the global scene: More and more this world is losing its compassion for the less fortunate and the poor who give so much. As our resource declines, I can only think of what's to come for the younger ones behind us - to live healthy lives, where resources are accessible without the dictatorship of global control. Knowing how global control works and to witness it, I fear for their futures and wonder if they will have the same courage that hard times have taught us to survive ...

This piece of writing has led to further writing by the group's participants to express their opinions and describe their experience of fisheries policy. Inspired by this example, the group made another transition, this time to being a writing group.

Thus the group moved from discussion to inquiry to expression in a relatively brief period. The key point here is that the group is self-defining: none of the initiative, support, planning or motivation came from the outside the group.

This self-motivated and self-directed nature is one of the features that sets this group apart from the other rural learning circles that are looked at in this study. In talking to the participants about this however, they point out that there have been a couple of factors without which the group would never have happened. The first is the experience of eight years of community-based management in the local inshore fisheries. This work has often required fishermen to get involved in science, ranging from biological science about fish stocks, to social science about markets and local ecological knowledge. Without this experience it seems unlikely that a group of fishermen would have initiated a group like this. The other factor is the Marine Resource Centre. By offering support in the form of coordination and a meeting room, the MRC provided the minimal support needed to help to group start up and keep going. The key point here is that these institutions themselves - the FFGC and the MRC - are locally run locally directed civil institutions, which were created for and by the community to do this kind of support work.

The group's facilitation has been informal. By consensus at the first meeting it was agreed MRC staff would share the facilitation tasks. In most ways these duties have been very much like chairing a meeting. For example, the "facilitator" is usually sitting at the table, not standing at a flipchart. The facilitation has mostly involved helping to generate an agenda for each meeting, setting goals, and ensuring that everyone gets a chance to speak and gets a fair hearing.

This meeting-like structure raises the question: How is this group different from any committee that meets on a regular basis to discuss issues? The key difference seems to be that this group was started in order to answer some specific questions. "How can we set the record straight?" "How can we tell our one story of how these policies hurt our communities?" These questions soon led to broader questions: "What is social science?" "What is the purpose of a book like this?" These questions all began with the first person

plural, that is, they were group questions. This defined the group as a learning group from the beginning. Once the group was together there was great interest in peer learning. “Who can tell us this?” “Who else should we invite?” Finally the group was defined as learning group by the process by which it operated. Just by reading and summarizing the text, interviewing, and writing new texts, the group moved beyond sitting in a meeting to a learning environment.

Again, it would be wrong to assume that the peer learning that happens in this group is about the people with lower education levels learning from people with higher education levels. In fact there has been no element of tutoring or teaching at all. The peer learning has gone in a number of directions and for different reasons. Everyone seems to be learning from everyone else. Different people bring different expertise, and learn from each other’s area of experience and leaning. In this way the group recognizes the authority of different kinds of knowledge: what fishermen know about what happened in the fisheries, what fishermen’s representatives know about what happened at meetings, what researchers know about how social research is done, and so forth. There has been a great deal of learning taking place in this group according to everyone in the group. There seems to have been a kind of complementarity at play around the table, between some very different kinds of knowledge and learning.

Why do people come? Clearly it is self-motivation that makes people come back to these sessions. There is no external pressure or demand for this group to keep going. There was no grant or project given to the MRC that required it to keep the group going. The group goes on solely because of the interest and commitment of the participants. Why is this happening? The answer seems to lie in the overall context of this learning circle; that is, they already are engaged in the policy change issues that are being discussed. The learning that is happening here is part of a larger struggle that each participant has been intensely involved in. The group’s purpose is part of a larger purpose: to ensure that the coastal communities of this area retain some access to the natural resources (fish) that they depend on for their well being. But it is also more than this. If this had simply been a working group on privatization of the fisheries, it may well not have kept going with this many participants.

However, this group is about more than just addressing one issue; it is about getting together to look at a text that describes this issue. It is about the written word, the research and the discourse that describes the reality of what actually happened to people. One of the recurring topics has been the growing realization that what goes into books, and who gets to tell the stories, has a lot to do with what happens to people’s lives and livelihoods in rural communities. The participants do not come out of a sense of need of self-improvement or career betterment; they come out of a concern for their families, their livelihoods and their communities.

What kind of literacy learning? The learning that takes place in this group relates to the printed word in three different but related ways:

- Reading the texts, and summarizing them for the group. For some participants this involved reading at a much higher level than they would be used to in every day life. This kind of "leaping levels", where people read above their reading levels when there is a meaningful context and they know the subject area, is well known to literacy workers. This happened naturally as part of this group's work.
- Interviewing, as for example when John Kearney visited.
- Writing, mostly short pieces, or letters to the editor, relating to fisheries policy.

These language activities have not been about learning language or literacy skills per se, but rather about creating awareness of language, and its power to define reality. At the same time, a key aspect of this kind of literacy is demystifying the power of the written word. In this sense this group is an example of a learning circle that is focused on critical literacy.

This learning circle raised some interesting questions about learning circles in general.

- How can learning circles function without curriculum, educational structure or professional facilitation?
- What is the relationship between learning circles and social capital, e.g. the MRC and the FFGC, in the community that can support them?
- What is the relationship between commitment to social/political change and commitment to learning?
- What is the role of critical literacy in learning circles, especially as it relates to social science research? In the words of the handline fishermen:

This is where I think we need the opportunity to tell our story in good detail from beginning to end - how being very well organized won't stop us from being robbed or invaded or abused.