



The Learning Circles Project: *The Circles*



The Multicultural Women's Group

by Guy Ewing

Building Community in North York. The Jane-Wilson neighbourhood of Toronto, where the Multicultural Women's Group meets, is anything but "colourful". What you notice here first is traffic filling the multi-lane streets. There is the Sheridan Mall, with its enormous parking lots. There is chain store advertising everywhere.

But there is another neighbourhood under this bland exterior. In the strip malls, in between the variety stores and the wholesale outlets, there are stores where you can buy the raw ingredients for Middle Eastern and African cooking. And then you notice the variety of international phone cards sold at the variety stores. A group of women, in long, hand-printed dresses from the Horn of Africa, are making their way along the narrow strip of grass that separates the strip mall parking lot from Jane Street.

The place where the Multicultural Women's Group meets, the community centre at a place called Chalkfarm, exemplifies the neighbourhood's exterior blandness and interior life. The community centre is a small one-storey square brick building maintained by the City of Toronto. It is adjacent to two large, undistinguished highrise apartment buildings. These buildings are privately operated, but provide low-rent housing. Driving past Chalkfarm on Jane Street, one might not even notice these highrises, tucked behind the Sheridan Mall.

But the community centre at Chalkfarm is a rich community place. People come here to learn, celebrate, support each other, find solutions to individual and community problems. The Chalkfarm housing complex is the home to people from the Middle East, the Horn of Africa, West Africa, South Asia, the Caribbean, the former Yugoslavia. People come to the cultural centre to share their cultures, learn about Canada and support each other. This community place has been created over a number of years because of the leadership of Doorsteps Neighbourhood Services. The philosophy of this organization is to provide community support at people's "doorsteps". Like all community programs in the former City of North York, now amalgamated into Toronto, it serves a geographical area that is

larger than Parkdale, but it does this through three centres, each associated with an identifiable neighbourhood.

As was stated earlier, it is characteristic of Toronto neighbourhoods that they become communities through the infrastructure provided by municipal and community organizations. This is certainly true at Chalkfarm. For example, it is hard to imagine how the Multicultural Women's Group would have started without a place where people felt that they would be welcome, both a building and people. And where are the places you can go when you are new in this city, from another culture, perhaps mourning your homeland, living in close proximity to thousands of people, but all of them strangers? Places like this must be created. They are not a natural part of the urban environment, but the result of commitment to the idea of actualizing community in this environment.

But how are communities made? What makes community building work?

Community Building as Learning. Lorna Weigand, the Executive Director of Doorsteps Neighbourhood Services, has worked for many years helping to build community. Sitting in her small crowded office in the Falstaff public housing complex, one of the three neighbourhoods that Doorsteps serves, she reflects on what organizations like hers can actually do. She dismisses the idea that Doorsteps is simply a place where you can get discrete bits of information or support. Rather, it is a place of learning. Many kinds of learning are supported through Doorsteps. At the preschool play groups and parenting programs, parents and children learn together. In these programs, parents and children may learn particular skills, but parents and children are also learning, more holistically, how to learn within family units, and together with other parents and children, in the community. At the Healthy Lunch Program, seniors from different cultures learn together about nutrition, and also learn how to bridge cultural divides. The after-school programs provide help with homework, physical activity, and also a time for reflection and discussion about Canadian schools and their role in the community. There are formal learning opportunities at Doorsteps, an adult literacy class offered in partnerships with the Toronto Catholic District School Board and adult English as a Second Language classes offered in

partnership with the Toronto District School Board. Doorsteps also provides practical help: a toy-lending library, help with getting services, help with finding and getting a job. But this practical help is offered not only as a service, but also as a way of learning how to be a community in which mutual support is valued and freely given.

Lorna sees Doorsteps as an organization whose mandate is to support learning as a means to community building. Doorsteps is, then, a natural site for an inclusive learning group like the Multicultural Women's Group to take root and grow.

Friendship, Support, Learning: the Development of the Multicultural Women's Group.

The group began as a breakfast club for women at Chalkfarm. Lorna initiated this group in response to women in the neighbourhood telling her that they did not know anybody, that they would like to meet with other women. Lorna stresses that the group was not an idea that originated with her, but an idea that emerged from discussions with women in the neighbourhood. She sees this as an example of her role as a community "connector". A volunteer at Doorsteps who lived at Chalkfarm, Farida Haq, was enthusiastic about the idea of a breakfast club, and encouraged people she knew at Chalkfarm to come. Farida's role in making the group known was crucial when the group was starting up. Her leadership in planning activities with the group and ensuring follow-up continues to be important today. As at PARC, leadership from the community, not just the community organization, was crucial in the creation and continuing success of the learning group.

After a while, the group rescheduled for lunch-time; the community centre needed the big activity room where the group meets for a children's program.

Adjacent to the activity room, there is a kitchen. Preparing lunch became a part of the group's routine. Members of the group taught each other the cooking of their homelands: Ethiopia, Iraq, Pakistan, Trinidad, Sri Lanka, Costa Rica. Also, members taught each other about how to use foods available in Canada, like canned beans and frozen fruits.

Sometimes, they brought people in to help them learn Canadian ways with foods. One time, someone came in to teach them how to make freezer jam. This helped them to satisfy the demands of their children, growing up Canadian, for jam sandwiches.

This pattern of learning together and sometimes bringing in other people to learn from has been extended into areas other than food. A public health nurse will be brought in to discuss health issues. Someone will come in to talk about how the Canadian school system works.

Also, the discussion about food leads to other important discussions, about culture and religion. Lorna and Gladis Camacho, a Community Worker at Doorsteps, organize discussions about the cultures that the members come from. This leads to discussion about religious holidays, and about religions. Other religions, not represented in the group, are discussed. Ultimately, the discussion turns to living in a multicultural society, where many religions coexist.

The group has been able to help people in many practical ways. When people become aware of each other's needs, they can often help, ensuring that people get the necessities of life, as well as access to services. Also, as Farida put it, "Sometimes people need to learn how to complain" when they are not getting the services they need. The group provides a place where people can learn how to complain, in person or in writing. In doing this, they are also learning how the services work.

Members of the group know that they have access to the resources of Doorsteps. Doorsteps staff and volunteers can pursue a personal or collective issue raised in the group, and help members of the group find the services and information that they need. This includes help with education and job training. Gladis tells the story of one woman who did not speak English when she came to the group. At the group, she began to learn English. Then Doorsteps helped her to find suitable ESL classes and an office skills training course. Now, she is working in the office at Doorsteps and doing an internship to become a childcare assistant.

Written Language Learning in the Group. Language is another dimension of learning in the group. Several of the current group members learned how to speak English by coming to the group; they spoke rudimentary English when they first came, but can now converse comfortably in English. They were not attracted to the more formal environment of the English as a Second Language classes offered at Doorsteps and elsewhere in the neighbourhood. They preferred to learn to speak English in the informal learning environment of the Multicultural Women's Group.

Written language is learned as well as spoken language, and writing may be used as an adjunct to discussion. For example, at a session that I attended, the group was planning a community dinner to celebrate Eid, the feast at the end of Muslim holy month of Ramadan. As a way of structuring the planning, Lorna had brought a form used at Doorsteps for planning events, a table called "Event Planning Outline". It was a simple table, with a column labelled "Task" and another column labelled "Responsibility of". The table was handed out. Lorna led a discussion in which tasks were identified. Lorna, Gladis and some of the women in the group would write down the tasks. Other women just had the table in front of them as a visual representation of how the discussion was being structured. Then responsibilities were divided. Again, some of the participants wrote these down. Others committed the plan to memory, without writing it down.

The women in the group have a range of knowledge about written language. Lorna is very conscious of never forcing anyone in the group into a situation where she will have to reveal her ability or inability to use written language. At the same time, she creates opportunities for the women in the group to learn written English.

From my perspective as an observer with a background in adult literacy work, as well as adult English as a Second Language teaching, I noticed numerous opportunities in the Eid discussion for learning either about written language in general and written English in particular. Words were getting written onto the Event Planning Outline as issues were being discussed. Writing words down in situations where these words are being used and

are contextually important is a classic way of helping people learn sight vocabulary, in both basic literacy methodology and ESL methodology. Watching Lorna write “set up” and “clean up” into the Event Planning Outline was an opportunity to learn these written words.

Lorna says that, from time to time, the women with a better understanding of English will re-present something that Lorna or Gladis has presented to women in their first language. This informal teaching arises spontaneously within the relationships that develop in the group.

Learning Naturally. The Multicultural Women's Group was not established to teach language skills, or any other skills. It does not have a curriculum. It does not have performance objectives. It simply provides a rich environment for learning, and welcomes every woman into that learning environment, whatever her level of education, previous experience of learning, or language abilities.

Consider the range of what is learned in this group, about Canada, community, social and cultural issues, religion, collaborative decision-making. Particular skills are learned as well, from how to make freezer jam to sight vocabulary. Because of where and how they are learned, these particular skills are full of meaning and value for the participants.

The history of the group shows how learning naturally develops in a group of people that value each other's experience. From learning to cook each other's foods, the members of the group moved on to learning about each other's cultures and religions, and then to discussion about living together in a multicultural society. In planning a community celebration together, they improved their knowledge of spoken and written English.

In this group, no relative value is placed on any one kind of learning. Learning written English does not count more than learning to cook new foods. In an environment without pinpointed training objectives, learning is continuous, interrelated, mutually supported.

Toward Community Education. From Lorna's perspective, the Multicultural Women's Group is an important step toward community education, but it is not the final step.

Although Lorna and Gladis facilitate this group, they cannot devote the time that could be used on follow up. There is no paid facilitation time for the group; Lorna and Gladis must take time out from their paid work at Doorsteps. Lorna feels that paid facilitation and follow-up would add an important dimension. For example, a paid facilitator could provide follow-up instruction for participants in the group that are working to improve their reading and writing.

Lorna has long dreamed of hiring what she calls a Community Educator at Doorsteps. The Community Educator would support a number of learning groups, as well as the learning of individuals in these groups. Doorsteps provides an environment in which many kinds of learning can grow naturally; the Community Educator could ensure that all of these kinds of learning are woven together and fully supported. She believes that a Community Educator would greatly strengthen community building in Jane-Wilson.

What Makes the Multicultural Women's Group Work? Each inclusive learning group is unique, but there are some features that the Multicultural Women's Group shares with the groups at PARC.

- A community centre. In Toronto, communities are not inherited; they are continually being created. A community centre, a place where there are staff and volunteers to support the community building process, can play an important role in supporting the creation of an inclusive learning group.
- A focus on learning rather than on skills training. Like PARC, Doorsteps is an organization where learning is appreciated and fostered. By taking a broad approach to learning, these organizations create an environment in which learning can be natural, multi-dimensional and meaningful. These organizations make the important link between learning and community building.
- Attention to fundamental needs. Like the PARC groups, the Multicultural Women's Group provides a place where people can find meals, practical help and mutual support. Doorsteps also makes a childcare worker available for the time that the group meets.

- The leadership of key community members. Like Maynard at PARC, Farida has played a crucial role in ensuring that the group is not owned by sponsoring organizations, but by its participants.
- Facilitation that respects participants with different levels of education and different language abilities. At PARC, the expertise of the literacy workers who facilitate the Literacy Group has been crucial in ensuring that the learning needs of people who do not use written language well are respected. In the Multicultural Women's Group, Lorna and Gladis both have many years of experience working with people who do not use written language, and of involvement with literacy issues. This shows in their non-reliance on written materials in the group, along with their sensitive use of written language for those who use it or learn how to use it.

Supports that Would Strengthen the Group. I have already mentioned Lorna's dream of a Community Educator position at Doorsteps. This position would build on the strong learning environment which the group has created by providing additional facilitation and individual support for learning.

Group participants identified a number of other supports that would strengthen the group.

- Money for transportation. Not all of the participants live at Chalkfarm. Transportation money would allow the group to include more women from the wider neighbourhood.
- Money for food. Food is currently donated by Doorsteps or by members of the group.
- More childcare. Although Doorsteps provides one childcare worker, there are sometimes too many children for one worker, and group participants must leave the group to help.
- Money to help people in urgent need of necessities. As it stands, Farida can usually link people with the help that they need through Doorsteps. Doorsteps can either link people to services, or, if this requires too much red tape, the

organization will often provide assistance out of its own budget. Having more money available for this purpose would be helpful to the women in the group and to Doorsteps.

- Money for crafts. Women in the group are interested in teaching each other crafts, and Doorsteps can sometimes find some money for supplies, but money for equipment and supplies would be useful, particularly money to buy sewing machines. Access to sewing machines would be of practical assistance to the women in the group, and would provide a good opportunities for language learning, sharing cultural knowledge and learning a marketable skill.