

**Learning Communities and Community-Based Marine Management:
Two Examples from the Field**

**Coastal Zone Canada Panel: “A Network for Coastal Learning Communities: An
Opportunity for Cross-Scale Collaborative Management”**

Arthur Bull

There is a growing school of thought that puts learning is at the heart of coastal community-based management. Increasingly researchers and practitioners are pointing to the concept of learning communities as a way to focus and energize the work of communities as they take a greater responsibility for the management of their marine resources. This line of development immediately raises some strategic questions about how these kinds of learning communities (let’s call them CBM learning communities) can best be developed and sustained.

In this paper I will be looking at two examples of adult learning initiatives that relate to community-based fisheries management (CBM), with a view to posing and, tentatively, answering some of these questions about CBM learning communities. Both these initiatives were projects of the Bay of Fundy Marine Resource Centre (MRC).¹ The first one was the Bay of Fundy Community Learning Network (BFCLN), a large scale, multi-faceted three year project that was funded under the federal government’s Community Learning Network (CLN) grants program. The second one was the “Fisheries Discussion Group”, which was initiated at the MRC, and later became part of a research project called *The Learning Circles Project*. This project, which was funded by the National Literacy Secretariat, was national in scope, included a rural, urban and First Nations perspectives. The MRC was one of the three sponsoring organizations (along with an

¹ Founded in 1998 and locate din Cornwallis Parks, Nova Scotia, the MRC is a community-based civil institution that provides technical, educational, research , organizational and informational support to groups involved in community-based marine management.

urban and a First Nations sponsor), and was responsible for looking at learning circles in a rural context.

An examination of similarities and differences between these two projects may hold some useful lessons about the relationship between learning communities and community-based management. At first glance this may seem like a hard comparison to make- apples and oranges- because of the difference in scope and scale of the two projects. But the purpose of the comparison is not to measure the extent of work done, or the amount of learning achieved, but rather to compare two different approaches to creating learning opportunities in the context of CBM.

The overall bias of this paper will be on suggesting strategic approaches for the development of CBM learning communities that support community-based management, rather than the working out of a comprehensive theoretical framework.

The Bay of Fundy Community Learning Network (BFCLN)

The Bay of Fundy Community Learning Network was a major three year project implemented by the MRC between 1999 and 2002. It was funded by the Office of Learning Technologies, part of (then) HRDC), with a grant of almost \$250,000.

The Office of Learning Technologies defined community learning network this way:

- **Community** is a group of people that share important characteristics, such as sharing interests or common issues, speaking the same language or living in the same geographic region.
- **Learning** means improving individual skills and knowledge in an interactive and informal way, rather than in an educational institution with an established curriculum. Some formal learning with links to educational institutions may be included as determined by community-identified needs, interests and priorities.
- **Networks** refer both to the technology that connects individuals and groups, and to the patterns of communication and relationships involving multi-point access within a community or communities.

In other words, CLNs are community-led approaches to encouraging lifelong learning, aimed at furthering social and economic development and supported by Internet-based computer networks.²

The BFCLN focused on five kinds of activities: learning opportunities, networking research, information and referral services, learning resources

The BFCLN provided access to a wide range of learning opportunities to fishermen and other community members. These included numerous learning opportunities relating directly to community-based management. Among these were workshops Community-based management, community decision-making, enforcement and compliance issues, community-based oil spill and integrated Management (Upper Bay of Fundy)

There were also several learning opportunities relating to organizational development. These included workshops on intercultural communications leadership workshops (Fundy Fixed Gear Council), on Management (Urchin Management Board) and community capacity building (Kings Area Community)

There were also number of post secondary courses, including Marine Emergency Duties (MED) Courses and St Francis Xavier Distance Education Course

Geographical Information System (GIS) workshop for Community Organizations

Networking was also an important component of the project, enabling peer learning between groups and individuals. This included: *bioregional network for the Gulf of Maine, inshore Fisheries network for Bay of Fundy, Fisheries and Right Whale Conservation Working Group Community Initiative Workshop International Ocean Institute Workshop Marine Affairs Program (Dalhousie) Intern*

²OLT website

http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/asp/gateway.asp?hr=en/hip/lld/olt/about/Community_learning_networks

The project also supported learning relating to community-based research, including research on the following species. Lobster Groundfish clam dogfish sea urchin.

In addition to its works on learning opportunities, networking and research the BFCLN also developed major initiatives relating to internships, information and referral, GIS mapping, learning resources and distance learning.

Although the BFCLN ended three years ago, its outcomes have continued to have a major role in community-based management in the region. Most notable of these is that the MRC

- linked with other groups and resource centres to form Saltwater Network, a network that supports community-based management in the Gulf of Maine through grantmaking, peer learning, capacity-building, convening and learning opportunities.
- has continued to play an active role on adult education, facilitated access to a wide range of marine-related learning opportunities
- has been part of a national research project, along with a coalition Aboriginal and urban literacy organizations, looking at the role of learning circles, as a means of providing adult education

These were important, if indirect, outcomes that resulted from the work done under BFCLN. There were also many important and valuable learning activities that took place during the life of the project. However, looking back on the project within a longer range context, it is painfully clear that not a single initiative of BFCLN lasted very far beyond the life of the funded project. One by one, the learning opportunities, research programs, and support structures ended, and no new programs replaced them. At the same time it is important to note that the project was deemed to be very successful. The evaluation, which was based on exhaustive monitoring and quarterly reports, as well a large scale final report, noted that according to all the indicators that had been set out, it had achieved all of its outcomes. Unfortunately the most important one- creating lasting positive change that resulted in stronger CBM and, as a result, some improvement in

people's lives- was not one of them. I will return to this critical point as part of the comparison with the other project.

The Learning Circles Project and “The Fisheries Discussion Group”

“The Fisheries Discussion Group” differed from the BFCLN in some very fundamental ways. The group 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.” Thus, in a period of less than a year, the group has made a number of quick transitions, based on participants’ interests and objectives.

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 fisherman, 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.*
- (2) *The invitation of a “guest speaker”, someone who was involved in the processes discussed in the book.*
- (3) *After the discussion of the transcription of the interview, one fisherman in the group brought some writing of his own.*

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.

When the MRC became participating organization in the *Identifying Inclusive Models for Life Lone Learning in Canada*, otherwise known as The Learning Circles Project, the Fisheries Discussion Group became one of the case studies for rural learning circle. The results of this study can be found on the project website at <http://www.nald.ca/learningcircles/index.htm> .

The project was a two-year study of learning circles in Canada funded by the National Literacy Secretariat. The study was a project of Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy (MTML) supported by a partnership among MTML, The Bay of Fundy Marine Resource Centre and the National Indigenous Literacy Association. Researchers from each of these organizations worked in collaboration with The Lifelong Learning Working Group, which includes representatives from the partner organizations, literacy workers and researchers in the adult literacy field, and which is itself a learning circle.

In this study the researchers:

- identified learning circles in three kinds of communities, urban, rural and Indigenous;
- documented the values and practices of learning circles;
- documented the impacts of learning circles on individuals and on communities;
- identified ways in which learning circles can be supported by communities and by government;

- developed a manual, *The Beginner's Guide to Learning Circles*, for individuals and organizations that might be interested in creating learning circles.
- compiled a list of background resources, both theoretical and practical, about learning and learning circles.

The project's methodology was based on narratives about the learning circles

Although the Fisheries Discussion Group became part of the *Learning Circles Project*, it was not funded by it, and in no way was accountable to it. In terms of sustainability, it was not depend on the larger project either. At present the discussion group is not meeting, but there have been requests by some of the participants to bring it back together, and the MRC is currently in the process of responding to thee requests.

Based on these brief sketches of the two projects it is possible to highlight some of the key differences and similarities between them, with a view to drawing out some useful lesson learned. Their differences can be drawn out by means of a list of key contrasting features of the two projects.

On the one hand, the BFCLN was

- a large scale project
- supported by single government grant (\$250,000)
- highly monitored and evaluated according to the funder's criteria
- not sustainable beyond the life of the funded grant period
- a stand alone project, that is it did not building working links with the larger field of the adult learning
- not networked with other community learning networks
- not linked to specific action and activism in the community
- focused on single , one off learning opportunities, such as workshops and courses

On the other hand The Fisheries Discussion Group was

- a spontaneous response by the MRC to a perceived need on the community
- was not funded by a particular grant
- was part of a larger adult education field, with a context of critical literacy and popular education
- developed based on the input of participants
- was not evaluated or monitored in any way
- part of a larger network with literacy groups as well as other CBM groups
- took the form of an ongoing group that evolved according to the participant interest and demand

When it comes to similarities between the two projects, there is one that stands out beyond all others. That is, both projects required ongoing organizational support by a local community-based civil institution. this support consisted of

- facilitation
- note taking
- meeting room space
- taking responsibility for setting dates and informing participants

Without these simple support functions, either on the larger scale of the BFCLN or on the much more modest scale of the discussion group, there was little chance that they could continue in a viable way.

Based on these brief descriptions and comparisons it is possible to identify a set of issues and questions relating to learning communities and their relationship to community-based management.

- 1) How can learning communities, and all the learning activities that constitute them, be sustained?

The lesson of form BFCLN is that major government funding does not always translate into sustainable. in fact, it can be just the opposite

2) *What is the role of local civil institutions is critical in order to provide stable, on-the ground support for learning opportunities*

There are key support functions that are need at a local level for CBM Learning communities. This question also relates to the first question, about sustainability: that is, perhaps the learning opportunities that make up a learning community- learning circles, peer learning, workshops and so forth- may come and go in response to immediate community needs and aspirations relating to CBM. The question of sustainability of any one of these is only relevant in so far as that learning activity is meeting that particular community need. The question of sustainability is however critical at the level of the resource centre. It is at this level that the question of organizational sustainability needs to be addressed. Of course this is a tall order, and requires its own set of strategies, tactics and probably a stubborn streak of tenacity.

3) *How learning communities should be evaluated?*

The comprehensive evaluation of BFCLN does not seem to have contributed to any ongoing learning of lesson from the project. On the contrary, it may have actually decreased the MRC's ability to focus on long term sustainable change, because of its linear and summative nature. This may point to a deeper contradiction between standard evaluation methodologies and learning communities.

The need of state funded agencies to identify indicators and measures of knowledge may in fact undermine the very notion of learning communities.

This may apply equally to CBM learning communities. At the same time there is a deep-seated recognition in the field that we need to know whether our efforts made a difference in the world. This points to the need for new and innovative approaches to evaluation of CBM and learning communities.

4) *How should CBM learning communities relate to the larger field of adult education?*

Although the Fisheries Discussion Group did not have a strong links to the larger national project, it may have been a very useful for the MRC to have been part of the project, in terms of its learning about the potential for drawing on popular education and critical literacy tradition for doing CBM work.

Taken together these point to some ways to proceed strategically in developing CBM learning communities. Based on the lessons learned from this comparison, one version (among many, no doubt) of a CBM learning community might look like this:

- adaptive and responsive learning circles, unburdened by externally dictated funding periods, evaluation and monitoring processes and guidelines, which can emerge and change as needed in the community
- a well-funded and sustainable local community-based support institution (like the MRC) which provides basic logistical, facilitation and organizational underpinning for existing learning circles, as well as developing and resourcing new ones
- strong links to the field of adult education that is rooted in popular education and critical literacy
- strong links between learning and specific CBM actions and activism at a grassroots level
- active networks at a regional, national and international level