



# Creating Local Non-formal Educational Opportunities as a Practice of Freedom

One of the best Canadian examples of such an exercise of educational freedom is called LIRN writes **Scott Graham and Karen Thompson**. (SPARC BC)

“ Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity, or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which [people] deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.<sup>1</sup> ”

How do we make education the practice of freedom? Freedom to name community issues, freedom to develop solutions together, freedom to take action, freedom to reflect on our actions, and freedom to persist in our efforts to improve community well being? The answer to this question can be found in the last issue of SPARC BC News, specifically the article by Anne Docherty and Doug Donaldson. Anne and Doug have it right—we start by creating non-

formal learning opportunities with people in our community.<sup>2</sup>

Community leaders in BC have, and continue to, express an interest in practicing freedom through the exercise of developing local non-formal educational opportunities—specifically the content, format and outcomes of such opportunities. One of the best Canadian examples of such an exercise of educational freedom is called LIRN (Learning Initiatives for Rural and Northern BC), which can be found in meeting spaces in rural and northern communities across BC throughout the year. In the next few pages, we provide an overview of LIRN and some highlights of 2007 and 2008.

LIRN was founded in February of 2006 with the mandate to work with communities in building local capacities. It is a partnership between two government agencies and three provincial non-government organizations who recognized the need to collaborate in

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Shaull, “Foreward” in Paulo Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972) p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Non-formal Education (NFE) has been defined as any intentional and systematic educational enterprise (usually outside of traditional schooling) in which content and format is adapted to the unique needs of the learners (or unique situations) in order to maximize learning about something locally relevant. See: Kleis. 1973. p. 6.

## Knowledge & Learning

- ▶ order to provide meaningful opportunities for community learning initiatives. The partners include the Canadian Rural Partnership, Service Canada (New Horizons for Seniors Program), BC Rural Network, Self Help Resource Association of BC, and SPARC BC. Together, the LIRN partners work closely with community-based organizations to plan, design, deliver and evaluate one and two day community development education workshops across rural and northern parts of BC.

The LIRN BC process is designed to make non-formal educational opportunities readily accessible for communities in rural BC. A coordinated intake process allows communities to apply to the five different partner organizations for funding, facilitation, and organizational support through one simplified application. The selection process also invites collaboration among different groups (for example non-profits, levels of government, First Nations groups and the business community), to identify community needs together, because applicants are evaluated in part on their community support and input.

As a result, the topics of LIRN BC events are community driven and consensus-based. Once the successful applicant communities have been chosen, each community partner is paired with a LIRN BC lead who walks the community partner through the steps of planning and delivering the event. The financial support provided to cover facilitation, venue, food and travel costs makes local learning

events affordable to organizations which might not otherwise have the resources available to plan and deliver an event of their choosing. The following comment from a LIRN community partner illustrates how LIRN support makes non-formal learning opportunities accessible in rural communities:

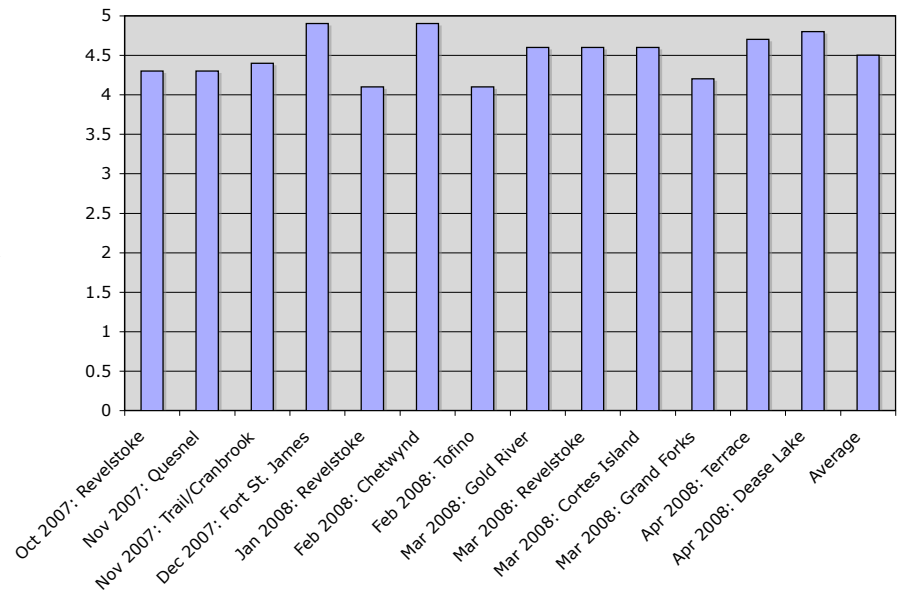
“ This was the first time we had some outside funds, for the hall rental, travel, food. It’s a big help for us because our communities are rural and isolated. Having funding for travel from rural communities was important. The food was important. Traditionally, it is important to offer food when inviting people to come, especially when you are pulling communities together and want to honor them for coming. It helps us to incorporate those traditional [First Nations] values. ”

Because the LIRN process builds the capacity of community-based organizations to design and deliver workshops of their choosing, LIRN provides rural BC communities the freedom to develop workshops that are reflective of community needs. The evaluation results from 2007/2008 suggest that there is a high level of satisfaction with LIRN BC events among workshop participants. For instance, Figure 1 illustrates that on a 1-5 scale, with 1 being

irrelevant and 5 being very relevant, workshop participants rate the relevancy to be 4.5.

Similarly, the other evaluation measures for the 2007/2008 year are also high. Participants were also asked to rate: the degree to which LIRN BC workshops connected them with other community members; the degree to which the workshops increased their interest in exploring new ways to

**Figure 1: Degree to which LIRN BC workshops are relevant for the community**



**Figure 2: Summary of Evaluation Results for LIRN BC 2007/2008**

| Evaluation Measure   | Average Across Events |
|--|-----------------------|
| Degree to which LIRN BC workshops connect participants with other community members                                    | 4.1                   |
| Degree to which LIRN BC workshops increase participants' interest in exploring new ways to work with community members | 4.3                   |
| Quality of LIRN BC facilitators  | 4.6                   |
| Degree to which LIRN BC workshops meet anticipated outcomes  | 4.2                   |

work with community members; the quality of the LIRN BC facilitators; and whether the workshops' anticipated outcomes were met. All evaluation questions were on a 1-5 rating scale, seen in figure 2, with 1 being the least favorable outcome and 5 being the most favorable outcome. Thus, the fact that the average for each measure exceeded 4 indicates that participants reported a high level of satisfaction with LIRN BC events in 2007/2008.

As LIRN BC concludes its second year of operations, the LIRN partner organizations will use feedback from community partners and workshop participants to revisit the LIRN process and assess whether there are further opportunities to improve the initiative's ability to encourage the development of non-formal, community-based learning events in rural and northern BC. ■