Community-Supported Learning: Practicums, Adult Education and Post-Secondary Institutions

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Practicums are a form of adult education that moves the post-secondary institution beyond the classroom and into the community. As adult learning experiences, they are unparalleled, combining the resources of the academy with the opportunities of the wider world. This paper will explore the links between adult education and post-secondary institutions through the phenomenon of the practicum. Using a tripartite lens of social, experiential and workplace learning, it will examine a particular practicum course to understand how it enables communities of practice—ongoing processes of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour (Wenger, 2011). These communities of practice, in turn, foster what can be understood as community-supported learning, part of the foundation of 'really useful knowledge' that characterizes the broad and vital mission of adult education.

Les stages sont une forme d'éducation des adultes qui sort l'apprentissage postsecondaire de la salle de classe et la situe dans la communauté. En tant qu'expériences d'apprentissage pour les adultes, ils sont inégalés, alliant les ressources d'une institution académique aux occasions du reste du monde. Cet article explorera les liens entre l'éducation des adultes et les institutions postsecondaires par le biais du phénomène des stages. S'appuyant sur la perspective tripartite de l'apprentissage social, expérientiel et en milieu de travail, l'article examinera un stage en particulier de sorte à comprendre comment il rend possible des communautés de pratique—des processus permanents d'apprentissage collectif dans une sphère partagée d'activité humaine (Wenger, 2011). Ces communautés de pratique, à leur tour, favorisent ce qu'on peut nommer l'apprentissage appuyé par la communauté, composante du fondement de « connaissances très utiles » qui caractérisent la mission élargie et vitale qu'est celle de l'éducation des adultes.

The association between adult education and post-secondary institutions is a relatively recent phenomenon in the long history of adult education. From modest beginnings in the 1800s, the field is now represented in post-secondary institutions within the country and around the world. These adult education programs vary in emphasis and content, with some focusing more on instrumental aspects and others highlighting past and present emancipatory practice. While many take place entirely within the academy, some offer learning opportunities outside the classroom. This paper will examine one such opportunity—the Practicum in Adult Education and Community Development offered by the Adult Education and Community Development Program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto.

This paper will examine this practicum course through a tripartite adult learning lens made up of social learning, experiential learning and workplace learning. It will explore the relationship between practicums—understood as a course or session of practical teaching (OED, 2016)—and adult learning, before discussing how this particular practicum course fits into this relationship and how it contributes to communities of practice and community-supported learning. Practicums are a vital part of what Nesbit (2006) understands as the practice of adult education in Canada—not a set of abstract concepts but "one part of a broader and vital mission for 'really useful knowledge' that helps create a more equitable world at individual, family, community, and societal levels" (p. 17).

Adult Learning

Adults learn all the time but it is often difficult to pin down what that learning entails. Thomas (1998) understood learning as essential to human survival and something that requires energy, takes time, is irreversible and cannot be forced. Jarvis (1992) proposed that learning is at the heart of everyday living and conscious experience. For Jarvis, learning is "the process of transforming that experience into knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and beliefs" (p. 11). This process, however, is ungovernable—we cannot control what will be learned or not learned. In the words of Shapiro (1995), "learning is essentially anarchical" (p. 45). This is what makes adult learning such an elusive concept.

And yet, many have tried to understand learning better by theorizing how adults learn. Indeed, Friedmann (1987) contends that all learning requires theory, if theory is understood as "a set of categories that will guide practice and help to process information generated in the course of the action itself" (p. 186). In the broadest sense, adult learning is divided into three interrelated areas: formal, nonformal and informal learning (see Nesbit, Brigham, Taber & Gibb, 2013; Spencer & Lange, 2014; Sumner, 2016). Formal learning occurs within the classroom, from primary to post-secondary. Adult education courses at universities are but one of many types of formal learning. Non-formal learning can be found in planned situations outside the classroom. Bread-making workshops, seminars on artificial intelligence, third-age learning lectures and yoga retreats can all be described as non-formal learning. Informal learning takes place through everyday encounters and self-teaching. Chatting with your neighbour about gardening techniques, learning about employment opportunities while at a book club meeting or teaching yourself how to make yogurt are all examples of informal learning.

Crosscutting these three broad areas are many particular types of adult learning, such as self-directed learning, social movement learning and transformative learning. Self-directed learning is a widespread form of learning that occurs as part of adults' everyday life. According to Merriam (2001), it is systematic, but does not depend on an instructor or a classroom. She goes on to describe three goals associated with self-directed learning, depending on the philosophical orientation of the writer: the development of the learners' capacity to be self-directed, the fostering of transformative learning, or the promotion of emancipatory learning and social action. Self-directed learning can occur in tandem with formal learning (e.g., when students teach themselves about new topics they have heard about at school), non-formal learning (e.g., when workshop participants follow up with some learning of their own) and informal learning (e.g., when neighbours learn about plans for a toxic waste dump when discussing environmental issues at a community meeting).

Another type of adult learning is social movement learning—learning that occurs as a result

of social movements, whether they are the so-called 'old social movements' like the labour movement or the 'new social movements' like women's movements, the civil rights movement, the gay rights movement or the occupy movement. Hall (2006) describes social movement learning as learning by those who are not only inside the movement but also outside the movement, as a result of actions taken or simply by the existence of social movements. For example, many men do not belong to women's movements, but they have learned a great deal from them about the realities of sexism. Social movement learning can occur at the same time as formal learning (e.g., students learning about the oppression of Indigenous people during a lecture about the history of enfranchisement in Canada), non-formal learning (e.g., participants in canning workshops learning about migrant labour issues associated with the tomatoes they are processing) and informal learning (e.g., seeing a Unifor logo on a t-shirt worn by a person in lineup at the grocery store checkout and learning more about trade unions).

And finally, transformative learning occurs in the face of a disorienting dilemma and results in a fundamental shift in worldviews. Unlike other forms of learning, it involves a "deep, structural shift in basic premises of thought, feelings and actions" (TLC, 2015). A death in the family, a divorce or loss of employment can trigger a process of transformative learning. Transformative learning occurs in formal learning settings (e.g., changing perspective on Indigenous people after a lecture about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada), non-formal learning settings (e.g., realizing how to lead a new life at a workshop for recently divorced women) and informal learning settings (e.g., shifting worldview on homosexuality after learning that a close family member is gay).

These are just some of the many types of learning associated with adults. This paper will focus on three types of adult learning with respect to practicums: social learning, experiential learning and workplace learning. Social learning recognizes the social aspects of practicum placements, and the many people practicum students learn from during their placement. Experiential learning validates the new experiences students engage in for the duration of their placement. And workplace learning speaks to the special type of learning that occurs when placements are located in workplaces of every kind.

Social Learning

Social learning acknowledges that people learn together as well as individually, which is a crucial counterbalance to the current neoliberal climate that cultivates atomic individualism. Finger and Verlan (1995) have defined social learning as "collective and collaborative learning that links the biophysical to the social, cultural, and political spheres, the local to the global arena, and action to reflection and research" (p. 505). Essentially, social learning posits that people learn by observing others (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007) and this type of learning can take place in many contexts, such as classrooms, communities, social movements and practicums. Friedmann (1987) adds to this understanding when he describes social learning as typically a form of tacit and informal learning that manifests as a change in practical activity. Such learning may include "so-called change agents who encourage, guide, and assist an actor in the process of changing reality" (p. 185).

In their examination of social learning, Wildemeersch and Jansen (1997) posit four principles of social learning: action- and experience-directedness, critically reflexive activity, dialogue and multi-actor orientation. However, they also warn that neglecting "its own situatedness dooms social learning to idealistic illusions about the learning of communality, or

to instrumental approaches for problem-solving" (p. 4). To overcome this problem, they suggest that each of the four principles should be critically questioned to ascertain whether they reflect the dilemmas inherent in both social practices and ways of life. This suggestion is mirrored by Merriam et al. (2007) when they understand the purpose of social learning as modelling new roles and behaviour through interaction with and observation of others in a social context. This modelling is particularly appropriate to the kind of adult education that involves practicums and overlaps with another type of learning pertinent to the focus of the paper—experiential learning.

Experiential Learning

Experiential learning is commonly used in two different ways: it describes the prior learning brought to a new situation that arises from learners' life experiences (and then provides the basis for subsequent learning) and it refers to learning processes in which the learners' experiences become the prime source and stimulus for learning (Boud, 2005). In his text on experiential learning, Kolb (20155, p. viii) refers to it as a particular form of learning from life experience and calls on Keeton and Tate's definition: "learning in which the learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied. It is contrasted with the learner who only reads about, hears about, talks about, or writes about these realities but never comes into contact with them as part of the learning process." (p. viii).

While experience is an important starting point for adult education, Spencer and Lange (2014) remind us that experience can be problematic. For example, "people may have to 'unlearn' racism or abuse...before they can learn tolerance or co-operative behaviour" (p. 9). They maintain that the challenge for adult educators is to both draw on and connect to student experience in ways that encourage individual and social growth and development. In other words, "students have to use socially learned knowledge but, at the same time, not be limited by their experiences" (p. 9). This perspective is in keeping with Kolb's (2015) observation that the aim of experiential learning theory is to develop a theory that helps explain how experience is transformed into learning and reliable knowledge:

> Truth is not manifest in experience; it must be inferred by a process of learning that questions preconceptions of direct experience, tempers the vividness and emotion of experience with critical reflection, and extracts the correct lessons from the consequences of action. (p. xxi)

This refining of experience is critical to any adult education program that includes a practicum component and connects to a third type of learning: workplace learning.

Workplace Learning

Workplace learning refers to changes in human consciousness or behaviour that occur primarily in work-based activities and contexts (Fenwick, 2005). It encapsulates many areas of adult learning, including formal, non-formal, self-directed, collective, and tacit informal learning activities (Bratton, Mills, Pyrch & Sawchuk, 2008). Unlike learning in academic environments, workplace learning "occurs in 'hot action' when decisions are taken on the run, relying on know-how and practical judgments, with the nagging doubt that action might be superficial, hasty or inappropriate" (Fenwick, 2005, p. 673). Given the wide-ranging nature of work, both paid and unpaid, these activities and contexts can vary tremendously, from unionized work and

precarious employment to self-employment and working at home. These activities and contexts can also create tensions in the field of adult education. As Bratton et al. (2008) point out, adult education and training try to fulfill the twin objectives of preparing people for work roles while also encouraging independent and critical thinking about these roles.

Spencer and Lange (2014) heighten the tension by reminding adult educators that the significance allotted to workplace learning over the last quarter century has its roots in management concerns for greater efficiency and higher returns, with little interest in worker wellbeing or job satisfaction. From their perspective, workplace learning has come to mean promoting worker adaptation to an increasingly uncertain and inequitable work environment in the global economy rather than actual changes in the way work is organized, such as worker-owned businesses. They ask whether the real purpose of learning at work is to "turn workers away from understandings of ownership, authority, and control, and towards accepting managerial objectives and employer ownership of value-added production processes" (p. 65).

Fenwick (2013) begins to answer their question by opening up the meaning of learning in the workplace to include not only skill development, innovation and organizational reform, but also critical analysis and organized resistance. She draws on Livingstone and Sawchuk, who argue that "learning should embrace working people's individual and collective agency in the social world and also in the process of representing that world" (pp. 227-228). When discussing themes in workplace learning research, Fenwick points out that discussions of workplace learning in the context of adult education only make sense within a political-economic understanding of the changes eroding work life and workers' rights, and a clear purpose aimed at the needs of workers. She concludes by advocating for a better balance between the interests of workers and employers by moving toward "productive, sustainable environments supporting meaningful work and strong communities" (p. 236).

Together, these three types of learning form a tripartite lens through which to view the practicum experience offered by an adult education program in a post-secondary institution. Like a kaleidoscope, this lens blends and separates the practicum into a vibrant but ever-changing phenomenon that, in turn, creates a fecund site for further learning.

Practicums and Adult Learning

In the theory-practice relationship, practicums lie at the practice end of the spectrum and take a number of forms, such as field experience, co-operative education, sandwich programs, internships, clerkships and clinical practicums (Ryan, Toohey & Hughes, 1996). Whether offered as a course or as a session of practical training, practicums reflect the importance of context in adult education. This is in keeping with the situated cognition approach in adult learning, whereby "learning is what is constructed by the interaction of people in a particular situation with particular tools or artifacts including language, signs and symbols" (Merriam, 2005, p. 46). From this perspective, learning is bound by context, dependent on tools and socially interactive.

In their review of the purpose, value and structure of practicums in higher education, Ryan et al. (1996) highlighted two rather different views of the practicum. On the one hand, some see the practicum as a chance to apply theoretical knowledge previously gained in the classroom. On the other hand, some argue that "the role of the practicum is to raise problems and issues which are used to trigger the investigation of related theory and knowledge" (p. 356), thus reversing the traditional relationship between theory and practice by placing professional practice at the core of the curriculum. Overall, Ryan et al. (1996) report, there is evidence that practicums give

students insight into the world of work and career prospects, job skills and on-the-job performance as well as interpersonal and social skills, enhanced employment prospects, improved attitudes toward employment, facilitated integration into the work environment, greater maturity and more positive contributions and attitudes in class. However, practicums also have negative aspects, such as lack of success integrating theory and practice, difficulty in organizing appropriate experiences, a narrow range of technical skills gained at the expense of a wider understanding of systems and organisations, poor, uneven supervision and lack of preparation for supervisors, experiences that can undermine the educational program and "exploitation of students as cheap labour" (pp. 359-360).

Practicums can be conceptualized as falling into four distinct types (Ryan et al., 1996). The apprenticeship practicum predominates in many business and engineering courses, as well as teacher education. The academic practicum occurs in medicine and nursing programs, facilitated by joint appointments to hospitals and post-secondary institutions. The growth or case practicum is unique to social work, but has some parallels in other disciplines, where it socializes trainees into the world of work. And the articulated practicum is found in a variety of disciplines, where it develops links between cognitive and experiential learning, as well as between theory and practice.

While learning in the classroom is always complex, adding a practicum component increases the complexity exponentially. In addition to individual teachers and students, there are also workplace supervisors and colleagues, a variety of organizational procedures and standards, and a range of expectations on the part of all participants (Ryan et al., 1996). Depending on how they are set up, practicums can involve not only formal learning in the higher education classroom, but also non-formal and informal learning in both the classroom and the practicum setting.

Seen through the tripartite lens of social learning, experiential learning and workplace learning, practicums can provide hybrid learning opportunities that are collectively oriented, based in experience and focused on work. These opportunities are explored in the following case: the Practicum in Adult Education and Community Development.

The Practicum in Adult Education and Community Development

The Adult Education and Community Development Program (AECD) is one of the oldest and largest graduate-level adult education programs in the world, currently hosting approximately 250 students seeking MEd, MA and PhD degrees. The focus of the AECD program involves the cutting-edge research, teaching and practice of adult education and social justice learning within local communities, across Canada and around the world. One of the distinctive features of the program is the combination of adult education and community development, two interrelated fields that reinforce and complement each other. An example of this fruitful alliance is the elective course called the Practicum in Adult Education and Community Development.

The Practicum is a semester-long course that combines a weekly three-hour class with a placement in a community organization. Students find their own placements, negotiate projects with mentors in their chosen organizations and carry out their practicums while continuing to attend classes. They are expected to spend three to four hours per week at their placement and at the end of the semester, their mentor attests to the completion of their project.

The projects reflect the highly varied backgrounds and interests of the students who are enrolled in the AECD Program. In their placements, students have evaluated, organized and delivered programs, documented and reviewed organizational practices, created online

resources, developed curricula, courses and manuals, carried out research, prepared and delivered workshops, and created facilitation materials. Their placements are usually (but not always) in small non-profit community organizations, including community health centres, an ecovillage, women's centres, a food bank, community centres, a co-operative and arts organizations, as well as larger sites such as hospitals and the University of Toronto itself.

The Practicum is a pass/fail course with no reading assignments, but students are required to give two informal presentations about their placement and submit a final reflective paper. Classes are devoted to discussing their practicum experiences, sharing problems, offering solutions, and reflecting on the learning goals they set out in their proposal. They also engage in skill development. At the beginning of the semester I ask them what skills they would like to work on. We make a list that includes a variety of skills class members volunteer to teach as well as other skills, then the students vote for their favourites and I organize the skills workshops that will take place during class time. Each iteration of the course is different, depending on the interests of the students who are enrolled. Over the years, students have taught each other skills such as conflict resolution, event management, icebreakers, accelerated learning and storytelling. I have also invited outside experts to give classes on such requested topics as organizing a workshop, program evaluation, incorporating the arts into teaching, curriculum design, online learning tools and change management processes.

Students take the Practicum course for a variety of reasons: to gain work experience, to establish new contacts in their field, to broaden and deepen their resumé and to find out whether they actually enjoy a certain line of work. For example, after completing a placement researching online resources for a centre that provided services for international students at the University of Toronto, one student declared that she learned that she preferred working face to face with people rather than working online.

Discussion

Seen through the tripartite lens of social learning, experiential learning and workplace learning, the Practicum in Adult Education and Community Development appears as a multifaceted learning experience that is different for each student. This is in keeping with the diversity of backgrounds, interests and placements students bring to the course. That said, there are commonalities, which can be explored in terms of the three types of learning.

In terms of social learning, students who take the Practicum course engage in collective and collaborative learning in both the classroom and the placement site. They learn by observing other students, as well as co-workers, mentors and (if applicable) the public. Much of the learning is tacit and informal, from learning how an office operates to learning how to engage with a targeted population, such as women, youth, Indigenous people, new immigrants and student volunteers. This learning results in a change in practical activity, as students are incorporated into the office environment or engage in new undertakings and relationships. Their learning includes change agents, such as the instructor, fellow students, mentors and co-workers. The students' learning for the Practicum also meets the principles of social learning. First, by carrying out their projects in their placement sites, their learning is action- and experience-directed, from organizing a workshop, to supervising volunteers to teaching public speaking. Second, through classroom discussions and assignments, their learning is critically reflexive. Third, through ongoing discussions in class or with their mentor, their learning is dialogical—based in interaction and communication. And fourth, whether in the classroom or

placement setting, their learning has a multi-actor orientation. Overall, the students learn to model new roles and behaviour, through interaction and observation in a social context.

In terms of experiential learning, students who take the Practicum course engage in both ways of learning. On the one hand, they bring prior learning to their placement situation, which arises from their work and life experience and/or their classroom experience. For example, some students are taken into a placement because they possess internet skills or ESL experience. On the other hand, their experience in the placement is a source and stimulus for learning. For example, through their placements, some students learn about the daily problems abused women face or Indigenous ways of life. The students learn from these life experiences and are directly in touch with the various realities associated with their individual placements. The feedback and reflection in the classroom helps to ensure that they not only learn from their experience, but are also not limited by it. Problems they face are shared and opened up for troubleshooting, or quietly discussed with the instructor. For example, one student partnered with a downtown hospital to provide a meeting site where recent immigrant women of her ethnic group could meet and discuss their problems. The project did not unfold as planned because the women did not want it known that they were attending these meetings. This resulted in deep reflection on the part of the student about the insider/outsider role she was playing, and a refined experience of her placement.

In terms of workplace learning, students who take the Practicum course have experienced changes in consciousness or behaviour. Some gained a greater respect for the members of the public they dealt with. For example, one student gained a greater understanding of the bereavement of those who had lost a loved one to AIDS, while another learned to appreciate the problems faced by those who access food banks. Students also learned to negotiate with mentors, speak to the public and co-facilitate a workshop on sexual health for newcomers to Canada. With respect to learning, there was formal learning in the classroom, non-formal learning through the skills development workshops, self-directed learning through researching potential placements, collective learning in the classroom and placement site, and tacit, informal learning everywhere they turned. For many students, learning occurred in 'hot action' as they facilitated workshops for co-workers, encouraged shy immigrants to speak in public, inspired low-income women to engage in self-expression through poetry and spoken word, taught senior immigrants English and liaised with peer outreach workers who lived on the street. Like many other adult education courses, the Practicum prepares students for work roles while also encouraging independent and critical thinking about these roles. Students find placements and learn skills that will help them in future employment. They also bring problems they face in their placements to class, such as workplace politics or lack of access to their mentor. These opportunities are complemented by other elective courses they can take in the area of workplace learning and social change.

Given this learning focus of the Practicum, the students can be understood as participating in communities of practice by engaging in an ongoing process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour (Wenger, 2011). Wenger (2011, p. 1) defines communities of practice as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly." In essence, they involve a perspective that locates learning in the relationship between people and the world (Wenger, 2010). Wenger (2011) posits three characteristics of communities of practice: the domain, the community and the practice. First, he argues that communities of practice have an identity defined by a shared domain of interest. In the case of the Practicum, the shared domain of interest is the class that forms a

bridge between academia and the working world. Second, he maintains that members of a community of practice engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other and share information. In the case of the Practicum, students engage in skills development workshops and class discussions, offer suggestions for solving problems faced in the placement and share information that would be helpful to their peers. And, third, he contends that members of a community of practice are practitioners who develop a shared practice through sharing resources such as experiences, stories, tools and ways of addressing recurring problems. In the case of the Practicum, students, through their placements, are indeed practitioners who share skills, advice and past experience. According to Wenger (2011), developing these three characteristics at the same time cultivates a community of practice. In this way, the community of practice acts as "a living curriculum" (p. 4), especially in institutions of higher learning, where practicums allow for what Wenger refers to as "peer-to-peer professional-development activities" (p. 5).

Moreover, just as the learning experience of the practicum cultivates a community of practice, this community of practice, in turn, affects educational practices and reaches out beyond the institution. According to Wenger (2011), this reciprocal relationship has three dimensions: internally, in how to organize learning experiences grounded in practice through participation around subject matters; externally, in how to connect student experience to practice through peripheral forms of participation in broader communities outside the institution; and over the lifetime of the students, in how to serve their lifelong learning needs by organizing communities of practice that are focused on topics of continuing interest for students beyond the end of schooling. All three dimensions are addressed by the Practicum course. Internally, learning experiences are organized around skill development that will form part of their future practice. Externally, students participate in broader communities outside the classroom, such as the gay community, the volunteer community, the arts community and the non-profit community, and become part of other communities of practice. And after the course ends, some of the students continue to participate in the communities of practice they were part of during their practicum. For example, after the class ended in 2016, one of the students volunteered to teach his peers how to use Excel, a spreadsheet program that a number of students felt they needed to learn. Some students have accepted job offers at their placement sites, thus continuing in their new communities of practice, while others gained access to professional networks as a result of their placement. All in all, these communities of practice illustrate that post-secondary institutions are not the only locus of learning but part of a larger learning system and that "life itself … is the main learning event" (Wenger, 2011, p. 5).

In spite of its successes, the practicum course has not been without its challenges. To begin with, a few practicum opportunities fell through before the course even started, reflecting the contingent circumstances of many small non-profit organizations, and forcing the students to drop the course. Other students had trouble negotiating their practicums with their mentors and worried as the deadline approached for submitting a project and thus gaining access to the course. Once the practicum commenced, some students ran into difficulties with their mentors, ranging from lack of access to and direction from mentors to one instance of unwanted advances. In a couple of placements, mentors directly asked the students if they were aiming to take their job away, which created tension in their working relationship. Many students mentioned trying to balance the demands of the placement with the time they had to give them, over and above the required three to four hours per week. These challenges were voluntarily brought to the classroom and put before peers for advice, which speaks to the need to create a

trusting and supportive community of practice so students feel free to share their problems and learn from their peers.

In spite of these challenges, the Practicum in Adult Education and Community Development seems to be meeting the needs of students in the AECD Program, judging by the growing enrollment. Conceptually, it falls into Ryan et al.'s (1996) typology as an articulated practicum, where links are developed between cognitive and experiential learning, as well as theory and practice, students, the university and field supervisors co-operate, students are encouraged to reflect, and learning experiences are planned by the three parties. What makes it unique, however, is that students choose the site of their practicum—as adults they are required to find a willing partner in the community in order to take the course. In addition, students help to organize, as well as participate in, the classroom component of the course by articulating the skills they would like to develop and helping to find the experts who can teach the skills to them. As adults, they also bring considerable experience to the practicum setting and the classroom, as well as gain experience by taking the course.

Conclusion

Thomas (1991 [in Spencer and Lang, 2014, p. 9]) has observed that "education floats on a sea of learning" and nowhere is this clearer than with practicum courses offered by post-secondary institutions. These courses have the potential to engage students in types of learning that would not be possible with a standard post-secondary education. The success of the practicum as an adult education endeavour rests on the fact that it is grounded in real-life issues and concerns. Students get out of the classroom—and the ivory tower—and grapple with issues in their communities: the plight of immigrants, spousal abuse, gay rights, food insecurity, reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, civil liberties and bereavement. While not all practicum placements deal with such critical issues, all of them create a bridge between post-secondary institutions and the community at large and open up unparalleled learning opportunities.

These learning opportunities can be understood as community-supported learning, a broad-based pedagogical concept that connects institutions of higher education—and their communities of practice—to the myriad of communities within and around them. Like community-supported agriculture and community-supported fisheries, community-supported learning is a shared experience that brings together people from various communities around a shared interest, be it food, fish or learning. Community-supported learning can incorporate many types of adult learning, including social learning, experiential learning and workplace learning, while challenging the individualized learning for personal gain promoted by the neoliberal market.

As a vital link between post-secondary institutions and the wider society, practicums provide an ideal site for adult learning—a clear connection between the field and the academy. In this way, they mirror the past, and point the way to the future, of adult education.

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