

Gary J. Anderson

A Conversation with Donald Snowdon

To most of us curriculum refers to the educational activities of school systems. There is, however, another broader field of curriculum which involves informal learning for people of all ages, learning about all types of subjects. The people involved in this important work are generally not academic scholars, rather they are field-based practitioners who spend their time getting tangible results. They seldom write articles for academic publications. For this reason, we present the work of Donald Snowdon not in the form of an academic article but rather as an interview, which through its medium communicates well the messages of informal curriculum building. Snowdon himself developed techniques of community development known as the Challenge for Change Program, which was sponsored in its early days by the National Film Board of Canada. It involves using film and videotape to help people in their own self development.

G.A.: Have you had any formal training in education as a discipline?

D.S.: None at all, but, of course, I have been exposed to a lot of people who are professional educators.

G.A.: So rather than a theoretical interest, it was a commitment to solving problems that made you interested in education.

D.S.: I have been governed by two things probably more than any other factors. One is that the options open to people are enormously greater than most of us believe - there is an enormous choice of direction that we can take individually. I have been very lucky in my own life in that I have had a lot of things fall in my lap. I am a curious human being and have been exposed to a lot of different circumstances and people in different conditions with different value systems and through that, I am becoming more and more convinced that options are open to people far more than they realize. And the second thing is that I have lived in a capacity to expand their horizons. I am not talking about choices now, I am talking about intellectual horizons. So I still have those two main convictions about

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the options for choice that people have and the places from which one can learn.

I am in no way discrediting the contributions of formal education, but we are living in a world where sometimes the opportunities for formal education can be very limited. In these situations it is a question of harnessing whatever meager resources are available, and that means marshalling the knowledge, experience, curiosities and energies of people who are normally regarded as potential learners at best, but never as teachers. In considering the expressed needs of people and how they may better equip themselves to deal with choices and become aware of options in their lives, I have come to realize that only by using the resources available locally is it possible to be successful. In my own life I have lived in a society where I think the outstanding characteristic of rural males was one of fear. They lacked any convictions of their own abilities to handle anything to do with their own affairs. In situations like that you develop a kind of curriculum that makes them face the realities of their lives; makes them face the deficiencies and shortages they have. By recognizing themselves and what they are, it is possible to identify the particular strengths and abilities they have to teach and learn from one another. As well, they can seek and find the external knowledge and experience they need to open up choices for themselves. It's a very informal kind of learning and teaching. I feel uneasy talking about this as curriculum because I am still so hide-bound myself, in terms of my own educational experience, in thinking about what curriculum is. But I really think there is a thing called curriculum which has to do with meeting the educational requirements of people who may not think in terms of formal education at all.

G.A.: Did you go to rural Newfoundland with that type of philosophy? How did it emerge?

D.S.: Certainly, I went with part of the philosophy because I had been working very intensively with the Inuit people in the Arctic in the mid-1950's. They had just been facing that enormous leap that they had made from living off the land and the sea, to a world in which they were trying to compete with people from the south. My involvement there taught me that there were ways out of the dilemma facing northern people at that time, namely - how could they possibly control anything that was happening in their lives when the intrusion from the industrialized world was so enormous? How would it be possible for northern people to survive that? It seemed to me that the one way of making it possible for them to cope was to expose them to ways of operating within the confines of what was going to be imposed on them. One of the ways was to learn how to function in an organizational sense, how to approach it in a political sense, and how to function in terms of some degree of economic and social control. So, I became involved in starting the first cooperatives in the Arctic which were designed to do exactly that. We insured first of all that they would have some degree of control over their own resources on their own land. Secondly, cooperatives seemed to fit within their own ways of dealing with one another as people and that

a cooperative type of organization, while it did not match the social norms of the Inuit people, came very close and it allowed people to learn to deal in situations with us on our terms. I had no illusions about the necessity of that because I had sat in on too many meetings prior to that where Inuit people coming from the north would sit in a big committee room on Parliament Hill and talk with all the big wheels of the Arctic. They tried to tell us about the country, but all they could tell us about was individual problems. They simply could not function. They had no tradition of functioning in such a culturally different environment. So cooperatives were designed to teach them to function in their dealings with us so they were no longer overwhelmed by the intricacies and the fancy structural and organizational footwork that we take for granted in our society.

That's a long way of explaining what I carried with me when I went to Newfoundland. Very few Inuit whom I met in the Arctic could not read syllabics and it was fascinating to me because they only had the bible. People would be so intensely concerned with the printed word that they would read and continue to read even though they had only one thing to read. It was only in the mid-1950's that there were other things printed in syllabics.

G.A.: One of the contributions that you have made that has always impressed me has been your provision of print materials that relate to the needs of rural peoples in Newfoundland. Was it based on that kind of background?

D.S.: Yes, in part it was, and partly on something I learned from the Inuit people and from the Newfoundland people when I first went there. I learned that even though we deal in totally different languages, there is a lingua franca. So, if we take time to think about it and work on it we can communicate with people who are not in the same sphere as we are. Without it, teaching and learning become like two tracks that don't join together. I learned that there were styles and ways of learning that have a great deal to do with the ease with which people believe in themselves and their experience.

You talk about print, but I have worked in societies, including Newfoundland, where, initially, most of the people were not literate. Under such circumstances how do you possibly have even peer teaching? If a man develops or modifies a technology in his own industry as a fisherman, how do you impart that information to another man five hundred miles away who does not read or write? So, we began to use another form of print that avoided the problem - film and videotape. We used it primarily for two reasons. One was that you can illustrate certain technological things much more easily on videotape than you can with print and photographs, and secondly, because in a number of areas like the south coast of Labrador, where people hadn't been exposed to print in any way, there had to be another way of learning and teaching. That is why Memorial University began what I think is the most advanced experimentation anywhere in the world in the use of moving images for learning and teaching. We began to experiment with film and video and found that

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the messages began to get across very well indeed. And not only that, we were able to use the experience and knowledge to help fishermen teach other fishermen how to fish in a way that was far better than I, or most people, could have done by talking to them myself. University professors and political scientists, for example, talking to Newfoundland fishermen about social organizations, just didn't make sense. They simply just did not use the same language. I see this repeatedly all over the world. When I work in India today, I see the agronomists talking to rural people on broadcast television and it turns rural people off. It just doesn't make any sense to them because they don't speak the same language.

G.A.: And when it's people at the same developmental level experiencing the same life space you feel it works?

D.S.: Very much so. There are limitations. Don't think that it is a panacea, but it is a wonderful starting point. For example, in the villages in north central India, where I am working now, we are working with very highly educated scientists and extension workers at the National Dairy Research Institute. It has a long and established rural extension program but they have asked for help in evolving techniques of communicating with illiterate people in their villages. We are doing this by using techniques we developed in Newfoundland. We use videotape to bring practices from villages where they have been developed to other villages where these practices might be of use.

G.A.: In India it must be very very hard for government administrators to work with people of different social standing.

D.S.: That is a reality in Indian life. How do you develop a concept of cooperatives that would work if you have a cooperative teacher who cannot communicate with the village peasant? But if you can go to a village where they have successfully developed cooperatives, and use the same people who are easily identifiable as being people who own one water buffalo or two buffalo or who own a small bit of land, then you have the key to open door to successful development. That is what we are doing.

G.A.: These people have no training in teaching?

D.S.: None at all. What we do is train people to be sympathetic animators. They discuss these things as peers with the village farmers.

G.A.: Would it be possible to summarize your methodology? What are the steps that take place? You have implied that you need someone who has experienced some success. You then take that person and what happens from there?

D.S.: The person may be used as a model, but it is made very clear that the person is an unusual person and that the village is an unusual village. You see, it might not just be an individual. Quite often a

dozen people or two people or twenty people in a community are used individually and together on videotape. Also, you can't move a village of three thousand people into a village forty miles away where something else has happened. In India it's impossible to think of moving the twenty people who helped make something happen and of having them stay long enough for the host village to benefit. With video tape you can.

The messenger is the key to it. The messenger is the community worker who carries messages on videotape and animates discussion in the host village. So, as with any learners, the methodology involves, first of all, determining where people are at in that rural community. We achieve this primarily through discussion. We get them to discuss their hopes and ambitions, the fears that they have, and then to talk about other people who have overcome their fears and achieved their ambitions.

The next step is to show examples of other people's successes on videotape. These examples involve people who have had the same starting point of lack of conviction and lack of choices. It is these people then who using videotape teach about their successes. The general problem is that most of our learners, even those who have been successful, lack conviction that they have anything to teach. This is characteristic of so many human beings; but maybe that naivete is part of the force that they have as teachers. For example, a farmer may find it extremely difficult to believe that he has the capacity to teach anybody anything, but once he discusses what he knows, what his life experience has taught him, the way he lives, his convictions about society, where he has gone himself, or where he has gone with his family or his neighbours, he can transmit that message to other people. Very often he can't do that standing up in front of a meeting but he can do it on videotape with a very sympathetic interviewer, and yet his experience and his message have enormous power for people like himself whom he will never see. And so, frequently these tapes have changed lives.

G.A.: Can you give me some examples?

D.S.: In the area which I mentioned, a small group of farmers were having problems marketing their milk. They saw that it was possible to benefit a lot more economically from the sale of milk. They organized themselves and they made a system work that has been very important both to themselves and to a lot of other villages that we have been working with which adopted their system.

In Newfoundland, I have been working very recently on the north coast of Labrador in an effort to get people to understand what cooperatives are. They have just organized a major fisheries cooperative. They did that in part because they saw films of Fogo Island people, who were just like themselves, talking about the difficulties they had had a few years earlier with the problem of gaining control over their own lives and what was happening to them.

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G.A.: Could you give us a synopsis of the Fogo Island situation which is not well known, yet is one of the turning points in your particular methodology.

D.S.: Fogo Island illustrates a natural progression that occurs when you go from an informal situation to a more formal one. Fogo is a place off the northeast coast of Newfoundland where in the mid-60's there was a severe economic depression. There was a belief among most people that they were to be resettled by the government onto the mainland of Newfoundland. There were about five thousand people on the island which is nine miles by twenty miles long. They lived, I think, in ten communities. There was a mercantile system on the island and historically, one trading company had been in a dominant position for a very long time. That trading company had bought much of the fish on Fogo and sold most of the supplies to the fishermen. The family who ran the business had either left or the children had no interest in it. So it was run by people in their late seventies and early eighties and obviously the business was about to collapse. There was a fear brought about by uncertainty about government policy. People believed they were going to be forced into resettlement from the island. Secondly, there was a fear brought about by the economic instability that might follow the loss of the traditional merchants. All these things were very frightening. On top of that, they lived in a society where there was a denominational school system with six separate school boards. Sometimes in a community of three hundred people there would be two or three different schools. This meant facilities and budgets for individual schools were just shocking. Sixty percent of the able-bodied people on Fogo Island were on social assistance at the time, and people on the island just didn't know what was going to happen to them.

Through a process of using film as social animation, people began to see several things. They didn't communicate much among themselves but through film they began to see that there was some consensus. Firstly, they wanted to stay on Fogo island. Secondly, they believed there was a resource base, a very rich resource base, around the island that could be developed. And, thirdly, they believed that there was nothing holding them back from development. It wasn't that they disliked one another, but there just had been no leadership on the island.

These messages were reported on film through a project of the National Film Board and Memorial University. The messages people had, including consensus on certain issues, were taken and shown to the cabinet of Newfoundland. The cabinet reacted. We gave them a chance to speak back to the people on film and out of that began a process of redevelopment of Fogo Island which has led today to the island being very prosperous. There is no able-bodied relief and the fishermen own a very very large fishing operation there. They built a small shipyard to produce intermediate technology fishing vessels and then closed it down when they had built enough to meet the needs of the island. There is a very large and very good regional high school on Fogo Island now. It is in the centre of the island where people

insisted that it be, because they would never have agreed on it being in one community. The whole tone of life is completely different on Fogo today than it was thirteen years ago.

It began with a very informal process of community discussion and use of film to show where there was consensus. Not just people on the island, but people off the Island were shown that there were certain things the people of Fogo believed were possible and certain things they believed they would not and should not do.

The process of using film that way was a very "cool" process. It allowed people to deal with very sensitive issues without confronting one another personally. If a cabinet minister had come from St. John's to Fogo Island at that time to a public meeting it would undoubtedly have been very riotous, but by using film in a very detached cool way, it let people come out of the film with their dignity intact. It was possible to bring points of view together that seemed to be in opposition to one another and to get them working together. That's what happened on Fogo.

It was possible for Fogo Island to survive. First of all, because people were not going to be moved. Secondly, they now believed that they could develop the fishery, though there were skills that they needed. At this point, it became more formal, in the use of film and videotape and adult education techniques. What are the skills that you need if you're going to run a business; function effectively on your school boards; set policies for this island; be a more confident fish plant worker? By using film and videotape, we began a more formal educational program on Fogo Island. Then we were able to recruit other external agencies which had never been hostile to involvement with rural people in Newfoundland but who had not necessarily known of the need. The Fisheries College, for example, began to hold formal classes in navigation, gear and technology. The fishermen on Fogo Island would not go to Fisheries College in St. John's, for to go to school was a recognition that they lacked formal education. And the whole social stigma attached to the forty-five year old man going to a school in St. John's was just something they couldn't cope with. What we did was bring the school out to Fogo Island. All the peers went to school together and the problem was licked. So then we began to see the school being used for adult education classes at night for people who had never been to school in their lives, or people who had lived a long way from school.

We began also to use the community-type school that had been developed in Denmark and had been modified in Prince Edward Island. In order to use a community resource to develop skills among other community people, you take a person who is the best sail-maker or the best net-maker, the best seamstress, the best bootmaker or the best home management person, and they give classes, totally unstructured classes. There are no examinations or fees. You simply use the best resources in the community to broaden the education of the whole community. We helped people feel relaxed about learning; we helped them not only realize that they had a great capacity to

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learn but that they had a capacity to teach as well.

I worked with a man named Carrero in Venezuela. Carrero is a prime example of a man who understands the sensitivities of rural people who are illiterate. He works with illiterate campesinos. All the farmers there were illiterate. When I was there in 1976, their existence was totally marginal. There was a lot of malnutrition, illness and very low income. Well, Carrero has used videotape on horseback to teach farmers how to farm better. He tells them that reading and writing are for the rich but that there is a new form of print now that will make them so rich that they will be able to afford to learn to read and write because they will have enough to eat. Because they've always revered print, looked up to it as something unobtainable, he encourages them not to think that you can learn only through print. He explains to the farmers that it would take too long for them to learn that way, but he has another technology that they could learn from right away. He then sets up his video monitor and tape deck and tells them they now have the technology to learn to farm better.

So this is the new literacy in the world today for the rural poor; the traditional classroom is just not relevant. Where I worked in India in one village in particular, the school has no floor, no windows, no door, and no furniture. It only has an old Neilson's chocolate map that I grew up with. So you are faced with the fact that for most people in this world there just aren't facilities for education.

G.A.: In terms of teacher education, is there anywhere one can learn these methods?

D.S.: I don't think so. I thought a lot about it, and I have been exposed to universities that teach community development. What I have observed is that they have an excellent training in theory but even though they may train people who originally came from villages, when they go back they are almost useless in terms of rural development in their own countries. There is no place in the world that I know of that provides academic training that is totally adequate.

G.A.: How do you pick out the leadership?

D.S.: Well, that's the hardest thing of all. It provides an enormous personal satisfaction and also sometimes a very great strain, but finding external people to actually do the work is the most difficult thing I have ever encountered. Finding people in the situation itself who become the leaders, the animators, somehow doesn't seem quite so difficult. I think it's because there is always such an enormous subconscious awareness that there must be more possibilities for individual life for people who are deprived in terms of exposure, experiences and choices. They still believe that there are better options open to them. The moment something comes along that seems to be honest and seems to offer some hope, then people come out of the woodwork. Certainly it is more customary for me to see them

coming out of non-traditional leadership roles. They are not usually elected officials because those people are very political and they use a political system for their own ends, not for the people they represent necessarily, though there are many exceptions. Generally, they represent a power structure in a village which does not always seem to most villagers to favour the development and evolution of good things for that village.

G.A.: Can people teach in their own village or is it necessary for them to go to the next province?

D.S.: It's both. Sometimes it's very very difficult, but quite often a person can teach his own peer group. But usually there are other factors in a village which make it possible for him to be perceived in other more positive ways.

G.A.: What about the political realities? Have you had problems in confronting the political power structures which have attempted to block this kind of development?

D.S.: I think through the whole of my life I have. If there have been common elements through it all, that has been one of them. When I was working in the Arctic, there was enormous pressure exerted on some members of the Federal cabinet to stop me working with Inuit people to organize cooperatives. There were pressures within the bureaucracy itself. What I was doing by suggesting that northern people should have a say in their own destiny didn't always meet the perspectives of other people.

When I went to Newfoundland, and became involved in Fogo Island, the government of the day, the premier in particular, was very very much opposed to what he described in the legislature as the meddling of the university in the affairs of rural Newfoundland people, but his views were not shared by all his members of cabinet. There were two or three of them who understood exactly what the process was. It was not a political process at all in the partisan sense of the word. I made it very clear, for example, to any of my extension workers that there were two reasons for which they would be fired. One of them was an obvious one, and the second was that if there was any overt political activity or religious bias, or any appearance of those, they would be fired. But the thing I have always found is that generally political people are not the enemy. If the people are supportive of a project, you can usually rely on the politicians' support as well. But sometimes there are people in the administration who find the organization of rural people wearisome. It makes demands on them that they have never had before. It keeps you administratively honest when you may not have had to be before.

