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Karsten Mündel

Fiona Duguid

Daniel Schugurensky

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Learning Democracy through Self-governance: The Case of Housing Co-operative

Karsten Mündel, Fiona Duguid, Daniel Schugurensky
OISE/University of Toronto

Abstract: Housing co-operatives are a unique site to learn democracy through participation in self-governance by volunteering on boards and committees. Members reported both nonformal and informal learning; the latter was particularly significant for the development of skills, knowledge, attitudes and values required for effective democratic participation.

Introduction

Although a large literature exists on informal learning and on volunteer work, studies exploring the connections between them do not abound. However, the first survey conducted by the New Approaches to Lifelong Learning research network (NALL) indicates that there is a stronger association between community volunteer work time and community-related informal learning than between paid employment time and job-related informal learning (Livingstone, 1999). To further explore this association, we are conducting research in three settings. One of them—the topic of this paper—focuses on housing co-operatives. We are interested in the type and intensity of learning acquired by co-op members who volunteer on committees and boards, in the ways in which such learning was acquired, and in some of the changes experienced by co-op members as a result of that learning.

The research literature on volunteer work seldom addresses learning-related issues (Schugurensky & Mündel, forthcoming). The focus tends to be on issues of recruitment and training (usually through non-formal education programs), with an emphasis on provision rather than learning. Additionally, volunteers do not generally cite learning as an explicit objective, benefit, or outcome (e.g. Elsdon, 1995; Percy, Barnes, Graddon, & Machell, 1988). This can be largely explained by the fact that this learning is usually informal, and most of the time such learning (unless it is self-directed) is implicit, tacit and unrecognised even by the learners themselves (Polanyi, 1966).

Three hypotheses guide this study. The first, following the writings of participatory democracy theorists and educators like Rosseau, Mills, and Dewey, is that one of the best ways to learn democracy is by doing it, and that this is a key route for an informed and engaged citizenry. Active participation in small group democracy has an educative effect: it encourages the capacity for self-governance and group work, facilitates the broadening of perspectives and the disposition towards the common good, generates greater feelings of political efficacy, increases political capital, and nurtures the interest for participating in public affairs (Pateman, 1970). Moreover, these processes help to develop and refine important democratic skills and attitudes like listening to others, clarifying our own personal values and the values of others, considering the merits of different options, and becoming more sensitive to diversity and justice issues. At the same time, real “mini-democracies” also have problematic processes and dynamics, as they often reflect issues of power and unequal opportunities present in larger society.

The second hypothesis is that housing co-ops constitute a particularly good setting for self-governance learning, because the decisions made by boards and committees have a significant impact on the daily lives of members. They regularly engage in decision-making ranging from setting the monthly housing charge (i.e. rent) to the selection of new members, and from hiring a co-op manager to establishing bylaws related to pets. The third hypothesis, based on the findings reported by Richmond and Mook (2001) in their study on the skills acquired by

resident members in a student housing co-operative, is that, in addition to self-governance issues, board and committees members have a great variety of learning opportunities, and that such learning often results in perceptible changes in attitudes, values, knowledge and skills.

Methodology and Sample

Although housing co-op members who sit on boards and committees do not tend to label what they do as volunteer work, we conceptualise it as such because it falls within the common definition of work that is freely chosen, unremunerated, and of some benefit to the community. Our study is carried out in Toronto, with the assistance of the Co-operative Housing Federation of Toronto (CHFT). A preliminary interview guide was designed collaboratively with the CHFT. It was subsequently modified after a focus group with experienced co-op board and committee members and through the initial interviews. The sample includes 40 co-operative members (23 women and 17 men). All had completed high school, 75% have completed a community college/tech program, and 43% hold university degree. One third of the respondents are retired, and approximately 10% are under the age of 29.

Through the course of the interviews, 32 indicators of learning in housing co-ops emerged. Since we were interested not only in the type of learning acquired, but also in its intensity, for each specific learning theme we asked members to rank their knowledge, skills, and attitudes on a five-point scale twice: before beginning volunteer work and today, at the time of the interview. If a change had occurred, we asked them to elaborate on the learning experience, clarifying the role of the co-op experience in the process. While it can be argued that self-assessments lack the rigour of more “objective” evaluations of learning conducted through pre and post tests, members’ reflections on their learning provide valuable data about the impact of their experiences in the housing co-operative. Moreover, we hope that this emerging information is complemented by other studies using different methodological strategies. In any case, we found that asking members to rank themselves was a good way to elicit their tacit learning. In fact, many respondents commented that they had not realised the breadth and depth of their learning from co-ops until the moment of the interview.

Preliminary Findings

For the purpose of analysis, we grouped the 32 learning themes mentioned by members into six categories: self-governance, housing co-op, leadership, attitudes and values, political efficacy, and other competencies. We recognise that our groupings are arbitrary, in the sense that some themes could fit in more than one category. However, a different arrangement of themes and categories would not alter significantly the nature of the findings. For the purposes of data reporting, we collapsed the 5-point scale in three levels of learning and change: low (1 and 2), medium (3), and high (4 and 5).

Self-Governance

This category includes five themes that relate to deliberation and decision-making: a) social and interpersonal skills; b) accountability, responsibility, and transparency; c) public speaking, communication skills, and language; d) listening and interpreting; and e) diplomacy, conflict resolution, and consensus building. Housing co-ops nurture self-governance skills because of the diversity of people represented and the strong relationships formed between people living together. These factors are compounded when members volunteer in committees and boards, which deal with self-governance dilemmas more often than not.

Through the interviews, members’ reported that their learning about self-governance was dramatic. Only one third reported “high” self-governance skills when they started volunteering. Among the rest, 40% ranked themselves as “low,” and 25% as “medium.” Today, nine out of ten

(92%) rated their current level on self-governance skills as high. In other words, while only a minority felt prepared to work effectively in self-governance bodies at the beginning of their terms, today that proportion tripled.

Several members noted that before moving to a co-op they did not have any real opportunity or need to engage in collective decision-making through consensus building. One of them made a comparison with past volunteer experiences, pointing out that the homogeneity of the group and the characteristics of the process provided scarce avenues to nurture self-governance skills. “Prior to living in the housing co-op, there wasn’t much need for consensus building. As an activist in an activist group we were already all on the same side. We didn’t need to build consensus really.” In the housing co-op, however, the heterogeneity of the groups and the need to make decisions together urge members to quickly develop consensus-building skills. This also involves listening skills (e.g. “allowing people to finish talking before making my mind about their argument”) as well as interpretation skills. This means being able, first, to interpret what another member was trying to say, which requires an open attitude, and second, to relate the argument to the context and to previous interactions with that member.

Indeed, members reflected on the challenges and opportunities that grow from the fact that the different governance processes take place with neighbours they know quite well. On the one hand, it is easier because “knowing people in the co-op, you know if they are meaning to sound horrible or if they are just not expressing themselves well.” On the other hand, as another member commented, an effort must be made to avoid board work “getting personal.” The data suggests that members’ engagement in decision-making processes with neighbours is an excellent way to learn about the different skills related to effective self-governance.

Housing Co-operative Skills and Knowledge

In order for members to work effectively in boards and committees, they need to develop certain skills and knowledge that are necessary for the management and daily running of a residential unit. The category “co-op skills and knowledge” comprises four themes: a) regulations, bylaws, and building codes; b) maintenance, repairs, and construction; c) staff liaisons; and d) member selection, education, and support. As in the previous case, self-perception of learning was significant. Whereas over three quarters (77%) of respondents stated that they had a low level of understanding of co-operative housing skills and knowledge before, 85% ranked themselves as high today. As a veteran member noted,

Most people who come to the co-op have never been managers before, have never fired or hired staff, never been involved in repairs, etc. They don’t have the people skills to be an employer. It is a great learning curve for everyone.

This was the area of learning with the greatest relationship between non-formal education (e.g. orientation courses, workshops, and conference sessions) and informal, experiential learning (particularly learning acquired by working with paid staff). Some of this learning was transferred effectively to other settings. For instance, a young member reported that “learning about staff and staff liaisons has helped me now in the job that I am in: how to deal with staff, how staff deals with members.” Another member mentioned that this learning allowed him to act as a consultant for a new condominium development that was stalled in writing its bylaws. The learning also helped members to demystify internal policies, which are sometimes seen as the product of autocratic management, and not the result of democratic collective processes. As one interviewee recalled, “I always thought that someone just put the bylaws together. It never occurred to me that we could come together to put them together.” This comment also speaks to the development of internal political efficacy, a topic to be addressed later.

Leadership

This category includes three themes: a) managerial and organizational skills; b) mentoring; and c) coordination and treatment of volunteers. The majority (68 %) reported that they started with low or medium leadership skills, and after participating in various co-op activities 96% ranked themselves as having high leadership skills. Many mentioned that learning leadership skills took place in a context of equality among peers, that members took different leadership roles, and that the concern for the common good was of foremost consideration in every process. As one member stated, “we were on a team, so it was teamwork mostly.” This emphasis on rotational leadership and democratic processes can be explained by the collaborative spirit that permeates the ethos of housing co-operatives.

The regular rotation of committee and board members led us to expect some degree of mentoring of new members by more experienced ones, and also of incoming leaders by outgoing ones. We found that while some members were very clear about the importance of mentoring (e.g. “when people had certain skills encouraging them to use them, even if they aren’t aware that they possess those skills”), others had not thought about its importance prior to the interview. It seems that mentoring is an area in which the housing co-op movement could work deliberately to nurture more learning opportunities and more sustained learning conditions. A potential exists for more productive relationships between non-formal learning about mentoring through workshops or courses, and informal learning through regular mentoring processes.

Democratic Attitudes and Values

The interviews revealed that members acquired more than skills and knowledge through their involvement in committees and boards. Changes in attitudes and values include four themes: a) co-operative principles, values and philosophy; b) concern for the common good c) multiculturalism, respect for diversity and openness; and d) an increased interest in international issues. On the first theme, an overwhelming majority pointed out that they originally moved into co-ops exclusively for affordability reasons. However, everyone but two stated they were planning to continue living in their co-op because they had found community and were committed to the co-operative principles. One member suggested that these principles form an ideology grounded in mutuality, respect, participation, and learning. Although members seldom made direct references to the seven Rochdale principles of the co-operative movement, their reflections on attitudes and values echo them. They mentioned that involvement in committees and boards played a key role in the acquisition and refinement of attitudes and values, and facilitated a shift from self-interest to a concern for the common good. As one member put it, “There is no point having a co-op unless you can also be concerned about other people’s welfare.” Most of the learning about attitudes and values contributed to members’ overall ability to participate in the co-op’s self-governance.

Political Efficacy

Political efficacy, understood as the confidence to influence political decisions, is derived from four themes: a) self-esteem and self-confidence; b) contacts with politicians and elected representatives; c) political interest and knowledge; and d) civic and political engagement. Of the six categories, political efficacy was the one in which members experienced the least amount of change. Whereas almost 60% reported low political efficacy before, 60% ranked themselves with high political efficacy today. This means that 40% ranked themselves as either low (16%) or medium (24%) today. However, the qualitative data suggests that increases in internal political efficacy (within the housing co-op) were larger than increases in external political efficacy (societal level). As one member noted, “I never had that opportunity before to know what I could do”. This statement on internal political efficacy was reiterated, albeit in different formulations,

by several members. For instance, another interviewee said: “I know more about how decisions get made, how things get run. If I felt strongly about the need for a new bylaw, I would know how to make a difference.” Comments about external political efficacy were less frequent and not as clearly stated though there is evidence that some members had increases in this area too.

Conclusions

1. The breadth and depth of democratic learning acquired by members through from participation in co-op boards and committees is significant. Meaningful changes in knowledge, skills, values and attitudes were reported in a variety of areas. To a lesser extent, members reported increases in political efficacy, especially at the internal level: many members noted that they were engaged in ways that they had rarely been prior to moving to a co-op. The intensity of learning is lower among participants in single committees, and higher among participants in multiple committees and in boards.
2. Although co-ops have long recognized the importance of co-operative education for the development of democratic skills, knowledge, attitudes, and values (Fulton, 2000; Goldbatt, 2000), most of the learning acquired by members comes through informal interactions, especially via the practice of small group democracy in committees and boards. This informal learning is generally tacit and unconscious, but it was possible to elicit it through the interviews. Despite its informal and incidental character, this learning influenced the financial and organizational “success” of co-ops, and provided both the lubricant for community involvement and that feeling of belonging that so many members welcome, hone, and enjoy.
3. Opinions were divided on the impact and relevance of nonformal education (e.g. workshops provided by the regional co-operative association, national and regional conferences, etc.). Nonformal education initiatives dealing with the nuts and bolts of operational issues such as member selection, board operations, or conflict resolution were regarded by many as particularly useful. Nonformal education was more effective when it took place on site, and was directly connected with pressing issues affecting the co-op.
4. Housing co-ops constitute a propitious milieu to learn the skills, attitudes, values, and behaviours necessary for the practise of democracy. At least two reasons account for this. First, these communities, and the social movement they collectively create, have an ethos of democratic values and principles. Secondly, the practice of democracy takes place in a small-scale community in which most people know each other relatively well.

Recommendations for Housing Co-ops

Two recommendations for the housing co-operative movement arise from this study. First, we suggest strengthening non-formal educational opportunities such as workshops or conference sessions to create the conditions in which members’ informal learning can flourish. Additionally, more sessions on mentoring and co-op leadership could be developed so that experienced board and committee members could train the incoming generation of volunteers. Secondly, housing co-ops could highlight learning as a direct benefit from volunteering on boards and committees. Making this more explicit could aid in curriculum development, and could strengthen housing co-ops’ existing volunteer recruitment strategies.

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