TOWNSHIPPER'S ASSOCIATION

Community Vitality in an Official Language Minority Context: How innovations in community learning and outreach models can positively impact OLMCs

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Presentation

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Introduction

For more than 35 years now Townshippers' Association has been at the forefront of community engagement, pursuing its mission to promote the interests of the English-speaking community in Quebec's historical Eastern Townships, strengthen its cultural identity, and encourage the full participation of the English-speaking population in the community at large. We work on behalf of over 46, 000 English-speakers who are spread across a region that is larger than Belgium in its geography; stretching from Philipsburg in the west to Megantic in the east, and from Inverness in the north to the U.S. border in the south.

This morning I will talk about Official Language Minority Community vitality; recent socio-demographic trends among English-speakers living in the Historical Eastern Townships; and demonstrate how the role of education for Official Language Minority Communities (OLMCs) goes beyond simply ensuring academic success or instruction in English in a minority language community context by exploring the positive impacts of 3 different kinds of creative learning models.

Community vitality for linguistic minority communities

A minority language group's vitality can be assessed by looking at how different variables within multilingual environments impact the resilience of that particular language community (Bourhis and Landry 2012; Hunting 2015).

Important factors contributing to OLMC vitality include an environment wherein one can receive an education and have access to both recreational and cultural activities in the official minority language (Canadian Heritage 2013; Hunting 2015). The presence of institutions actively offering services in the official minority language and possibilities for individuals to participate in the economic and social expansion of their community are also integral to building and sustaining OLMC vitality (Canadian Heritage 2013; Hunting 2015). Relationships with the majority community that foster support and cooperation between the two official language groups, recognition and respect for language rights, and influence and authority within the majority community institutions are also of tremendous importance (Canadian Heritage 2013; Hunting 2015).

For individuals, membership in an OLMC lends itself to increased barriers to education/health/employment which can foster a sense of exclusion and isolation from wider society, resulting in low levels of OLMC representation in leadership

roles (QCGN 2009; Hunting 2015). Access to institutions wherein OLMC members can affirm their individual and collective identities, access resources, and experience their culture in a concrete way becomes a crucial necessity for those trying to negotiate Quebec society in an OLMC context, especially when one accounts for the reality that the English-speaking community is diverse and dispersed across the province (Lamarre 2008; QCGN 2009; Hunting 2015).

Educational institutions within an OLMC context

Educational institutions are an important foundation of institutional completeness for OLMCs because they make an important contribution in the development of the next generation of community members equipped to influence the future social organization of the minority community (Landry et al 2013; ESSP 2015). These institutions also make important contributions to language socialization and ethnolinguistic identity development (Landry et al 2013; ESSP 2015). Historically, OLMC educational institutions have been recognized as important players in ensuring that the educational opportunities available for their minority language communities reflect community and regional values and priorities (Sheppard, Galway, Brown and Wiens 2013; ESSP 2015).

Educational institutions for OLMCs across the province are as diverse as the communities they are found in (QESBA 2006; ESSP 2015). Public institutions include one-room school houses on Entry Island in the Magdalen Islands, regional schools in smaller, more rural environments such as the Eastern Townships, and large schools in dense urban centers such as those found on the Island of Montreal (QESBA 2006; ESSP 2015). Post-secondary educational institutions offering programs for English-speakers tend to be concentrated in areas far removed from those who reside in the more remote rural parts of Quebec; this reality contributes to retention issues faced by OLMCs in rural regions and further illustrates the important role smaller community-based learning opportunities play for members of those communities (QCGN 2009; ESSP 2015).

Socio-demographic trends among English-speakers in the Historic Eastern Townships

With the proportion of individuals aged 45 and up out-weighing that of those aged 0-44 within the HET's OLMC, out-migration among young English-speakers remains a serious threat to the vitality of the English-speaking communities located in the Townships; a high percentage of young English-speakers continue to exit the region in favour of larger

urban centers such as Montreal or cities outside of the province altogether (Floch, 2010; Pocock, 2015A; Hunting 2015). The consistent out-migration of its youth population has left the Eastern Townships' OLMC vulnerable and largely void of its middle-class (Kischuk, 2010 as cited in Pocock and Hartwell, 2010; Hunting 2015). English-speakers remaining in the region aged 15 to 44 are weaker socio-economically than their Francophone counterparts, with high levels of unemployment and low levels of income, even for those with higher levels of education (Floch, 2010; Pocock, 2015A; Hunting 2015).

In 2011, one quarter of the English-speakers living in the HET were without a high school certificate and their tendency to have a low income (46.2%) was elevated when compared to French-speakers (40.9%) in the region (Pocock 2015A; Hunting 2015). Unemployment levels were also elevated among English-speakers in the HET when compared to their French-speaking neighbours (Pocock 2015A; Hunting 2015). Low income is more prevalent among English-speakers living in the HET (46.2% vs. 40.9%), with the percentage of English-speakers earning 50,000$ or more annually also falling below that of French-speakers in the region (Pocock 2015A; Hunting 2015).

Mental and emotional health indicators are used to measure a population's overall psychological well-being; they include one's sense of self, the perceived quality of their relationships, an individual's sense of belonging/perceived level of social integration, the sense of meaning and purpose derived from the activities they engage in, and their overall ability to negotiate life's everyday challenges (Pocock 2015B). Data based on the 2011-2012 Canadian Community Health Survey indicates that members of the English-speaking community living in the Estrie administrative health region (which covers the largest geographical portion of the HET) have some of the lowest levels of self-esteem among the province's 12 administrative health regions (Pocock 2015B). ESC members residing in the same region also ranked among the lowest in perceived mental health status and their impression that their lives had a sense of meaning or direction (Pocock 2015B).

Access to health and social services in English remains a high priority for English-speaking communities across Quebec and in the HET regardless of increased levels of bilingualism among younger generations (Pocock and Hartwell 2010; QCGN 2013; Hunting 2015).

Evidence suggests that the poor usage statistics of available health services by the English-speaking community are linked to fears of not being able to adequately understand and navigate the system and to an incomprehension of the

services available to them; research indicates that if steps are taken to promote the offer of services in English usage levels among English-speakers will increase (Kishchuk 2010; Hunting 2015).

In regards to diversity, newcomers form a greater proportion of the English-speaking population in the HET compared to the majority population sharing the same territory; a much higher proportion of English-speakers residing in the HET were born outside the province or country (25.4% vs. 4.1%) (Pocock 2015C). Mobility trends within the HET's English-speaking community also indicate that a significant proportion of the newcomers to this region have migrated here from within the province followed by those arriving from outside of Canada, and those moving from another Canadian province respectively (Pocock 2015C).

The following are three examples of innovative learning models currently in use across Canada, the first of which we have right here in the Eastern Townships regions; there will be a pop-up version of the third model here on campus Sunday and Monday [March 20-21, 2016]

Community Learning Centers

Community Learning Centers are defined as "as an equal partnership of schools/centres, public or private agencies and community groups, working in collaboration to develop, implement and evaluate activities to answer school and community needs that will enhance student success and the vitality of the English-speaking community of Québec" (Quebec 2012: 2); they provide an excellent example of how the role of education in a minority language context becomes broader than simply ensuring academic success when institutions act as hubs for both education and community development (QESBA 2006; Gonsalves, Kueber, Langevin, Pocock 2014; ESSP 2015).

Through an offer of diverse services and activities available outside of regular school day hours, the CLC initiative has developed a practical model that is able to support the needs of students, their families, and the wider community

(QESBA 2006; ESSP 2015). There are currently 37 Community Learning Centres schools in operation across the province of Quebec; the HET is home to three elementary school CLCs (Pope Memorial in Bury, Princess Elizabeth in Magog, and Asbestos-Danville-Shipton [ADS] in Danville) and one secondary level CLC (Richmond Regional High school) (Gonsalves et al 2014; ESSP 2015; LEARN 2016).

The CLC goal of supporting the comprehensive development of citizens and communities by fostering relationships between schools, families and communities promotes increased partnerships between sectors that once operated in silos and brings additional resources into communities (Gonsalves et al 2014).

Learning Commons

Similar to CLCs, the learning commons is a holistic approach that combines education and outreach to create a new model focused on collaborative learning that extends beyond the physical space of an educational institution (OSLA 2010; CLA 2014).

The learning commons philosophy is informed by the concept of social utility – modern learning taking place in a multi-purpose environment designed to accommodate a variety of learning activities (Educase 2011). Traditional library settings, whether public or linked to educational institutions (K-12 and higher education), are transformed from warehouses for collections of resources and the cataloguing of knowledge to learning communities where the goal is to build relationships between all levels of learners and foster the growth of knowledge and creativity within the milieu (Educase 2011; CLA 2014; Loertscher and Koechlin 2014).

At the center of the learning commons concept is the notion that every user of the space is a learner; doing away with the traditional dichotomy of teacher/student – everyone is engaged in learning (OSLA 2010). Depending on its location and physical setup, a learning commons can serve a school's curriculum while also providing learners with opportunities for making, doing, communication, and thought that enrich learning with a cross-curricular perspective (OSLA 2010; Loertscher and Koechlin 2014). In this capacity, a learning commons becomes an important catalyst, both virtually and physically, for the personal, intellectual, social and cultural growth of its users (OSLA 2010; Loertscher and Koechlin 2014).

Because the learning environment now draws on the expertise of multiple actors (students, teacher-librarians, library technicians, and community members) opportunities for the creation of knowledge inevitably lend themselves to the formation of partnerships and cross-sector collaborations (OSLA 2010; Educase 2011; CLA 2014; Loertscher and Koechlin 2014).

Makerspaces

Born of the *maker movement*, which describes the emergence of an increasing number of individuals engaged in the production of different goods who have found either physical or virtual ways to share their knowledge of production and creation with others, in recent years makerspaces have taken hold across North America and can be found in a growing range of teaching environments such as K-12 schools, community centers, libraries, museums and universities and are providing communities with an avenue for common expression, experimentation, investigation, creativity and learning (Educase 2013; Rosenfeld Haverson and Sheridan 2014; Moorefield-Lang 2015).

While their physical make-up is varied, makerspaces typically share common characteristics: they invite curiosity, inspire wonder, encourage playfulness, promote problem solving, celebrate trial and error and embrace collaboration (Educase 2013; Kurti, Kurti and Fleming 2014). These spaces are community learning environments equipped with tools, resources and space for inquiry-based learning – Makerspaces, for example, are often integral features of libraries and other educational spaces that have been transformed by the Learning Commons model (Educase 2013).

Depending on their placement and particular resources, makerspaces bring together teachers, librarians, students, and community members and promote a new perspective on learning that builds and strengthens community ties (Rosenfeld Haverson and Sheridon 2014). On a school campus they provide a multidisciplinary learning laboratory; when they exist in less formal learning environments like public libraries, museums and community centers, Makerspaces transform how the community sees these spaces and their place within them and they become hubs for both knowledge and community development (Educase 2013; Rosenfeld Harvenson and Sheridan 2014).

Positive impacts for OLMCs

The positive impacts that innovative outreach models and creative learning opportunities like the CLCs, Learning Commons, and Makerspaces can offer Official Language Minority Communities who are struggling to sustain their vitality, are many and varied: they include increased self-esteem, intergenerational contact, access to skills-building, access to state of the art resources, avenues for collaborative projects, and the development of innovative partnerships. Learning and the production of knowledge within an OLMC context is so much more than solely focusing on student success or ensuring instruction in English, it is naturally linked to the transmission of that community's collective

heritage over generations; providing younger generations with the innovative tools and creative skills they'll need to remain in their home regions and prosper while actively contributing to the majority society.

Community Learning Centers, Learning Commons', and Makerspaces offer OLMCs an opportunity to leverage their one remaining community institution (their public schools) as well as other available community resources to maximize their potential and positively impact their community's vitality and overall well-being. Their respective philosophies and working models empower educational professionals, students of all ages, and community members and provide a natural vehicle for the communication of an OLMC's culture, heritage and customs in a stimulating environment that encourages both innovation and learning; equipping participants with important life, professional, and social skills.

For an OLMC such as the one native to the Historical Eastern Townships whose demographic profile describes an aging community whose remaining youth and middle-class populations are struggling with skills development, employment, and general well-being, the potential impact of these community outreach models and creative learning opportunities are significant because both formal and informal options are available to community members and their educational institutions; widening their reach and potential to impact isolated populations.

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