

Award Recipient Articles

CHANTAL HUTCHINSON, John Dobson Award co-Recipient 2021

As this year's recipient of the John Dobson Award, I would like to express my deepest thanks to the Dobson family for their generosity and support for research with an international focus. I am presently completing the final two courses in the Master of Adult Education Program, and although I am excited to reach the goal I envisioned three years ago, I am saddened to leave this rich learning community.

I was drawn to this program, and my subsequent research topic, by my fifteen year teaching experience at a college in British Columbia. Teaching Adult Upgrading, I was fortunate to engage with a remarkably diverse group of learners, including International and Indigenous students. It was through these relationships that I became increasingly aware of the systemic barriers and marginalization many of these students faced. Additionally, as I became involved in institutional initiatives examining digitally enhanced learning and teaching, my interest in the role of Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2020) in informing online and blended course design burgeoned. I specifically wondered if the approaches of UDL could foster inclusion for under-represented and marginalized learners, particularly International and Indigenous students.

Through the application of Appreciative Inquiry (Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012), my research project involved interviewing faculty, vocational instructors, and administrators to discuss successful approaches, informed by the principles of UDL, for supporting International and Indigenous students in face-to-face, online and blended delivery. Participants shared a host of practices related to acknowledging learner diversity in course design, community building, learner support, engagement, and assessment methods. These interviews were most heartening as I became privy to the deep connections these educators had with their students. To further extend the project, my intention is to disseminate these findings to the larger college community to potentially inform colleagues' pedagogical approaches. I also hope to invite students to report on their efficacy.

The dramatic increase of online and blended delivery as a result of Covid-19, will forever shape post-secondary education. Going forward, it is essential that course design and delivery be inclusive and representative of learner diversity. Fundamentally, it requires adult educators to acknowledge the uniqueness of each individual, support students holistically, and humbly engage in the difficult work of de-colonization.

I would like to once more thank the Dobson family for their continuing support of International students. I would also like to thank the faculty of the St. FX MA Ed program, and most specifically my advisor Dr. Carole Roy for her unwavering support. Finally, I would like to thank the members of my cohort for their authenticity, inquisitiveness, and creativity.

References

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MARY MCPHERSON, John Dobson Award co-Recipient 2021

I am deeply honoured – and delighted – to be selected as a co-recipient of the 2021 John Dobson award, which pays tribute to John Dobson’s life and his international work. Dobson was a professor in the St. FX adult education department and died tragically while working in Mexico in the 1980s.

My project, *The Circle Keeps Getting Bigger: A Case Study of Immigrants’ Informal Learning in Rural Nova Scotia*, is close to my heart. Since childhood, I have been attracted to the places where people from diverse cultures intersect and make connections. Writing my thesis gave me the opportunity to study an international issue close to home. I explored how newcomers and local people in rural Nova Scotia have found ways to successfully “dialogue across difference” (Brigham, 2011, p. 41) and to consider the role adult education might play in the process.

The five participants in the project provided rich and thoughtful data on their settlement process, both in the context of English language acquisition and regarding the social and inter-cultural connections they made with the local community. The small population in their rural communities and the general openness of the local residents have enriched and inspired their learning experience on the job, in the community, and attending language classes.

Based in part on each participant’s interpersonal style, they were able to improve their English proficiency through relationships that are deeply satisfying to them. Living in a rural area, they were able to develop relationships, gain an understanding of local culture, and improve their English proficiency. Esma (a pseudonym), one of the participants, described how she has made friends explaining, “The circle just started getting bigger and bigger – you meet one person and then you just connect with another person and it goes around.”

At the same time, the participants acknowledged that the process may be more difficult for many newcomers than it has been for them. They offered a number of concrete recommendations on ways the learning process for newcomers (and locals) could be refined and improved for other more recent arrivals, with specific suggestions for language school teachers and local community members. These suggestions included prioritizing one-on-one language learning in the first year, incorporating more community experiences into the language school classes, and strategies for encouraging individual connections between locals and newcomers.

This project highlights several under-studied aspects of research on adult immigrants’ learning to date. First, as McGivney (2006) suggests, even though informal learning “arises out of people’s everyday lives and experience [it] has received relatively little attention in education research and is largely neglected in education policy” (p. 11). Most of the research on immigrants’ learning in North America focuses on formal or non-formal (e.g., language school) learning. Second, past research has focused almost exclusively on immigrants living in urban areas. Finally, and – for me – most importantly, only a small percentage of migration research focuses on the real-life experiences, perspectives, and insights of immigrants.

My thesis has been a collective effort. I am grateful to the research participants, who I regard as the project's co-authors, my advisors – Dr. Leona English and Dr. Maureen Coady, and all the community members who have helped guide the project. I firmly believe this is an area of research that merits greater recognition and further research in the adult education community. I offer a heartfelt thank you to the Dobson family and the selection committee for your recognition of this area of research in an era of increasing cross-cultural/cross-country migration.

References

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McGivney, V. (2006). Informal learning: The challenge for research. In R. Edwards, J. Gallacher, & S. Whittaker (Eds), *Learning outside the academy: International research perspectives on lifelong learning* (pp. 23-35). Routledge.



JEWELL MITCHELL, Marie Gillen Recipient 2021

Leaders lead, that's what they do, it is who they are. Or at least, that is what I thought before I enrolled in the International Women's Leadership and Community Development Cohort of the Masters of Adult Education program at St. FX in the spring of 2020. As a career Executive Director, I was unaware of how ill-fitting the mantle of leadership had become for me as a woman and social justice advocate. I did not understand how my constant consumption of leadership theory through books, podcasts, and executive training – all marketed brightly with the bold promise that if I followed a particular time-management method, decision-making framework, or workflow system, I would win at leading – was actually deadening the creative life force that fueled my desire to instigate social change. It was only as I was introduced to Feminist theories of knowing and leading, as I explored and connected into the community-situated, social movement driven Canadian Adult Education tradition, that I began to examine my leadership experience and an interest in women's leadership of not-for-profit community organizations emerged.

Through my decade-long affiliation with the YWCA movement in Canada, I have come to know the powerful perspective shift that comes from listening to the voices of vulnerable women, and the life-changing impact when human dignity is positioned at the centre of community work. On more than one occasion, I witnessed the impact of how this commitment can change women's lives forever. Understanding how little can change people's lives, changed me. It shifted my perspective on what is possible and resulted in my leadership role in the creation of the YW Jean E.S. Irving Centre for Women and Children, a 15-unit supportive housing complex for vulnerable young mothers which opened in 2016. In addition to housing,

this four million-dollar project, designed as an economic empowerment solution to New Brunswick's intergenerational gendered poverty, provides supports to address the complex needs of women within the facility and for others in the wider community. The results continue to exceed all expectations. Women have benefitted from barrier-free access to high-quality early learning and child care, skills development, education, health and wellness opportunities, financial and food literacy programs, and much more.

As YWCA Moncton Executive Director during that time, it was my responsibility to bring this ambitious initiative to life, from strategic visioning, development of relations with government officials and stakeholders, communications, financing and fundraising, to critical design and oversight of the capital renovation project, through to the implementation of a fiscally sound operational plan to ensure long term sustainability once the project was realized. Through all the leadership growth this required, I came to know that women, when given access to the tools they need, become powerful agents of change, creating better lives for themselves, their families, and their communities. This knowledge further shapes my leadership as it continues to fuel my current work of supporting professional learning opportunities to enrich New Brunswick Early Childhood Educator's practice and my research interests.