

EASTERN TOWNSHIPS COMMUNITY SEARCH CONFERENCE

Donald W. de Guerre,
Concordia University

Rachel Garber, Daniel Séguin

Abstract

A community-based participatory action research methodology was used to assist the English-speaking community in the Eastern Townships of Quebec to develop a picture of its most desirable and achievable future and a set of strategic action plans to create that future. Following a brief introduction to Open Systems Theory and its methods (Emery, M., 1999), this paper reports on the preparation, the implementation, and the follow-up and diffusion stages of this project and then compares the actual achieved conditions with the ideal sought-after conditions. The conclusion includes a summary of the participants' findings and their report to the English-speaking community.

Résumé

Une méthodologie de recherche-action participative s'appuyant sur la collectivité a été utilisée pour aider la communauté anglophone des Cantons-de-l'Est à tracer le portrait de son avenir le plus souhaitable et le plus réalisable ainsi qu'à définir un ensemble de plans d'action stratégiques en vue d'assurer un tel avenir. À la suite d'une brève introduction sur la théorie des systèmes ouverts et ses méthodes (Emery, M., 1999), cet article rendra compte de la préparation, de la mise en œuvre et des étapes de suivi et de diffusion de ce projet et comparera les résultats réels obtenus avec les résultats idéalement envisagés. La conclusion inclura un résumé des constatations des participants et leur compte rendu à la communauté d'expression anglaise.

Introduction

This paper will report on the application of a participatory action research process in a complex, dispersed community. While the process is a reliable method that has had success elsewhere in Canada and around the world for over 40 years, it was less than fully successful in this case. Consequently it became a significant learning and insight opportunity for the community and for social science research. This report should properly be seen as a snapshot in time in what is an

ongoing community development and capacity building process that began before this research and continues after it.

There are many variants of action research (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Gloster (2000) outlines the systemic action research model developed by Fred Emery (1981, reprinted in Trist, Murray & Emery, F.E., 1997). Gloster (2000) differentiates between action research (ar) which improves the practical affairs of a particular social system and Action Research (AR) which does this and also contributes to social scientific knowledge. Such AR often begins as "ar" with a pragmatic real world situation rather than the hypothetical pursuit of theory (de Guerre, 2002), and that was the case in this research. One cannot quite know in advance whether or not ar will become AR or simply be another case study. In this sense, we agree that AR is like traversing an epigenetic landscape (van Beinum, Faucheux, & van der Vlist, 1996), that is one in which the field changes with every move the researchers make, which makes traditional research planning difficult if not impossible.

Following preliminary exploration of different approaches, the AR model selected for this research is called the two-stage model of active adaptive action research (de Guerre, 2002) and is a collaboratively co-designed and emergent process. In this AR, the values are those of direct participative democracy, by which we mean that not only do people have the right to be involved in the decisions that affect them, but they also have the psychological need to be able to influence authorities in their environment. The theoretical grounding used in this AR is Open Systems Theory (OST) as developed primarily by Fred and Merrelyn Emery in Australia (Emery, F. E., & Trist, 1965; Emery, M., 1999). The socio-ecological perspective taken is within the world hypothesis of contextualism (Pepper, 1942), by which we simply mean people-in-environment. People are embedded in natural and social systems and are co-implicative with their environments (Emery, M., 2000; Trull, de Guerre, Seguin & Pace, 2008).

The opportunity for this study was an invitation to work collaboratively with Townshippers' Association, with financial support from the federal Department of Canadian Heritage. Townshippers' Association is a non-profit community organization with a generalist mission to support community development in the Eastern Townships English-speaking community (ESC). In its strategic planning consultations two years earlier, community members had suggested the need for greater coordination of community development initiatives, so that various organizations could collaborate in addressing agreed-upon priorities. In the view of Townshippers' board of directors, the participatory-democratic nature of the community search conference seemed to provide the best avenue to initiate such a shared process.

The key finding of this research is that collaborative action research is an emergent process that takes on a life of its own. It cannot be controlled, certainly not by the researchers and not even collaboratively with local community partners. Funding deadlines influenced the research process in less than helpful ways. In addition, this paper will discuss the methodologies used, the design and management mistakes made, as well as report the outcomes for the ESC in the Eastern Townships. Finally we will raise a number of questions for further study.

The Research Site: English-speaking Community of the Eastern Townships

The Eastern Townships are located east of Montreal and south of Quebec City in the province of Quebec, Canada. With a population of 677,526, the Townships comprise an area the size of Prince Edward Island (16,000 square kilometers) and are largely rural with one large city, Sherbrooke (population 152,027).

The Eastern Townships is one of the few regions of Quebec where the first European settlers were not from France. Starting in the late 1700s, English-speaking settlers of various European and American origins came to this region. In 1861, the Eastern Townships population was 58% English-speaking—almost 90,000 people, more than in any other region of Quebec, including Montreal (Rudin, 1985). Over the years, the French-speaking population has grown, while successive emigrations have reduced the number of English-speaking Townshippers.

In the 1970s, this decline accelerated. Between 1971 and 2001, the number of English-speaking Townshippers dropped by almost 30%. As the English-speaking population declined, so too did the community's influence and visibility. Today, the Townships' English-speaking community numbers approximately 42,000 people, roughly 6% of the total population (Statistics Canada, 2007; Pocock & Hartwell, 2010). The English-speaking age group 15–44 is proportionately smaller than in the French-speaking population, and its members have, on average, lower levels of education, employment and income than their French-speaking counterparts (Floch & Warnke, 2004; Floch, 2010). "This creates a bi-modal population. On the one hand, you have a very young population with poor prospects while, on the other hand, you have an aging population with a high level of income and security," explained Floch. "This demonstrates socio-economic weakness...a missing middle, so to speak, that affects community development" (Personal communication, March 12, 2004).

Kishchuk pointed out that the community is missing not only its middle generation, but also its middle class (2010). The out-migration

of young people and the overall continuing decline in the English-speaking population has created a substantially higher proportion of older people and a middle generation that is not only lacking financial resources, but is overburdened by child rearing and elder care. Consequently it is hard to find volunteers who have the time and energy to invest in building community (Kishchuk, 2010; Pocock & Hartwell, 2010). Despite our best efforts to include the middle generation, their voice was not strong in this research.

Research shows that the Townships English-speaking community vitality is a low 2 out of 5 on a vitality rating scale devised by Floch (Klimp, 2006). On the other hand, the community has a high number of arts professionals and a positive and ongoing commitment to volunteerism and community development. Many youth are fluently bilingual and proud to be Townshippers. Engaging youth directly in the development of the region should produce positive results. One of the goals of this research was to engage youth in planning for the future as equals with other demographic groupings, not as an isolated special group.

Theoretical Grounding (OST) and Two-Stage Model of Active Adaptation

OST states that four parameters are both necessary and sufficient to characterize any open system or any environment. The core concept is a system open to its environments with a constant two-way transaction between system and environment such that they are co-implicative. Behind the concept of the open system lies the concept of directive correlation (Figure 1).

The open system (Figure 1) expresses the co-implicative nature of

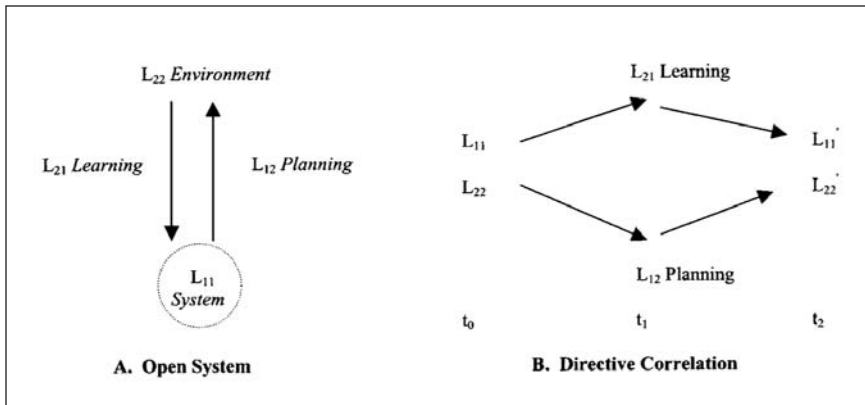


Figure 1. Open Systems Theory

system and environment, all components of which are governed by laws (L) that can be known. The system (designated "1") acts upon the environment (designated "2"). This is the planning function (L_{12}). The environment acts upon the system and is known to us through the function of learning (L_{21}). L_{11} and L_{22} express the intrinsic nature of the system and environment respectively (Emery, M., 1999).

The concept of directive correlation (Figure 1) states that a necessary condition for the subsequent occurrence of a certain event or goal is that two or more variables should at a given time be in exact correspondence for an adaptive relationship. Environment and system are then directly correlated with respect to the goal and the starting conditions (Sommerhoff, 1969). That is, they are correlated in terms of direction. They act to bring about the same future state of affairs from the same starting point. From the original condition at t_0 , which consists of system and environment, both system and environment make changes at t_1 , resulting in a new set of conditions consisting of a changed system and environment at t_2 . In Figure 1 (Directive Correlation) the changes shown are directly correlated and, therefore, adaptive. "Of course, an infinite number of cases exist in which system and environment are not directly correlated and, therefore, are maladaptively related" (Emery, 2000). The directive correlation model expresses when adaptation is or is not occurring over time. The basic AR cycle is mapped as a directive correlation in Figure 2. The basic OST method for active adaptive planning is a search conference (SC) which

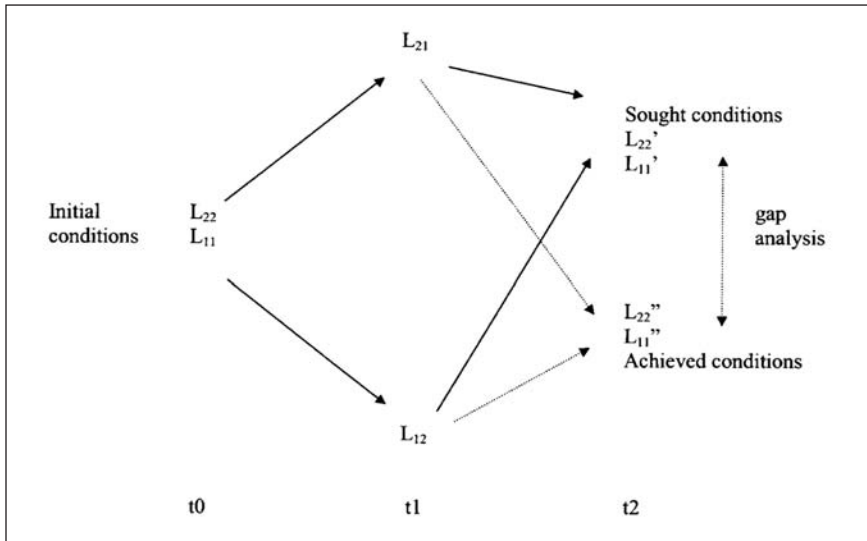


Figure 2. The Basic AR Cycle Described as a Directive Correlation

describes the current system-in-environment and then plans to build a directive correlation towards a desirable future.

“Searching is the translation of a system of understandings into practice to extend the emerging culture and to bring it under conscious control” (Emery, M., 1999). The SC is an event in the middle of an extended participative planning process that includes preparation and follow-up implementation of action plans. Success depends upon the quality of the preparation, management of the event itself, and the structures consciously built into the implementation phase. These structures must provide the characteristics for productive group life, ongoing learning and ongoing active adaptation to changing events.

The SC is structured on the second design principle or democratic self-managing organization (Emery, M., 1999). It uses this structure as a basis for learning that establishes the conditions for trust (Asch, 1952) and allows for the creative working mode (Bion, 1962). In this environment, conflict is dealt with openly, diversity is celebrated, and diffusion occurs through contagious positive affect. The long-term practical purpose of OST is cultural change (de Guerre, 2000) in which the use of the two-stage model of active adaptation is a critical tool. This approach has been applied elsewhere over many years with great success. It is a reliable method for participative community strategic planning and development (Emery, M., 1999). However, SC is not a standardized methodology. Each SC has to be uniquely designed and managed to fit the local context, and this is done jointly with local community members.

A community search conference (CSC) normally takes between 24 and 28 hours of working time and is normally done over two nights and two days. Participants explore their community-in-its-

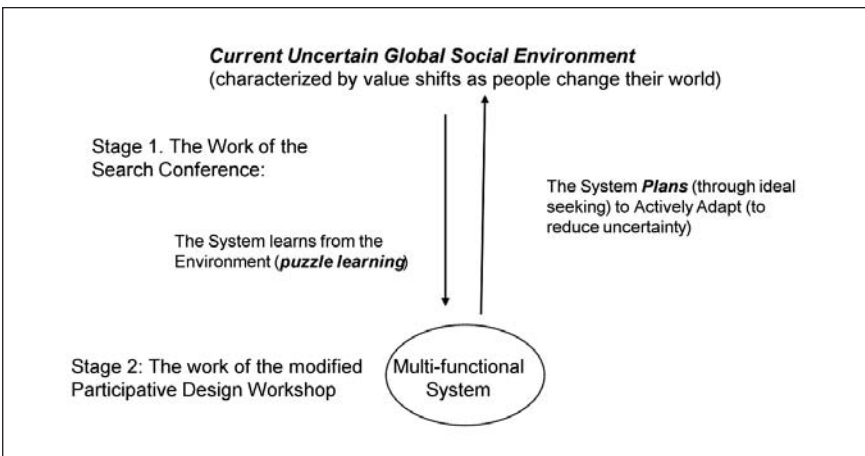


Figure 3. The 2-Stage Model for Active Adaptation

environments in three stages. The first stage explores the system environments and the probable and desirable future environments. The second stage captures history and heritage up to the present, which provides a picture of the current characteristics of the community. In the third stage, participants choose the most desirable and achievable future, plan how to create that future and then form action groups to carry out their plans. In each stage, participants collect perceptions in a large-group brainstorming exercise then work in small groups to analyze that data, and finally integrate their small-group findings into an agreed-upon community statement using the rationalization-of-conflict method (Emery, F.E., 1966; Emery, M., 1999). In a CSC, agreement means that the participants are willing to represent, explain and take leadership after the CSC to act on the agreements made during the conference. Participants are asked to attend as persons with multiple life and work roles, not as representatives of a particular role. Additionally, it is explained that they are a microcosm of the whole, and are working on behalf of the whole community. A record of their discussion and their findings is distributed to the whole community at the end of the CSC as they move into the community growth and diffusion stage. Consequently, there is quite a bit of dialogue during each stage. Participants in all three CSCs in the Eastern Townships took their task very seriously.

Chronology of Events

The preparation phase began in mid-2007, the learning and planning events themselves were in January and February 2009 and the follow-up and diffusion phase ended in mid-2010, four years ahead of plan. The entire CSC process took approximately three years. The follow-up and diffusion phase was intended to last until the ESC's desirable future was achieved in 2014, but the action groups were unable to function independently and irresolvable disagreement brought the implementation process to a halt in the summer of 2010. As we shall see, however, the diffusion process continued informally. Participants learned about the nature of their community-in-environments, shared a vision of their most desirable and achievable future, and had a number of good ideas about how to proceed. They continued to act informally within their local communities but not as a whole system representing the Townships ESC as a whole.

The preparation phase, which overall took about 18 months, included a series of educational sessions and significant discussion of the approach with the Townshippers' Board of Directors, and a decision to go ahead took some time. The Board came to understand that collaborative action research in which the researcher and the researched

take joint and mutual responsibility for outcomes is not consultative in nature but rather a process in which the researched own the data and take responsibility for implementation of their plans. There were discussions, for example, about how the development of a community of commitment to action might change their existing strategic plans, policies and programs. The Board consulted others in the ESC before determining to go ahead.

A core group or Design Team was formed to work collaboratively with the researchers to determine the research question, determine who would be involved, and manage the logistics. They began to meet regularly to design the events themselves, and contacted potential partners to help take leadership for the CSC as co-conveners. The co-conveners were Bishop's University, Champlain Regional College (Lennoxville campus), Dobson-Lagassé Entrepreneurship Centre, Eastern Townships Community Economic Development and Employability Committee (CEDEC) and Townshippers' Association. The Design Team met frequently with the researchers throughout the process, and together they developed the research process. The research question was: "What is the most desirable future for a vital English-speaking community in the Eastern Townships in 2014?"

A participative democratic selection process called the community reference system was used to recruit participants (Emery, 1993). A comprehensive website was developed to inform the public and ensure that all transactions were transparent and democratic. In addition, a series of advertisements in various media informed people about information sessions that they could attend to learn about the CSC process. Fourteen information sessions were held in various parts of the Eastern Townships so that people could easily attend. At these information sessions, some 200 participants were introduced to OST and the CSC, and then invited to write down three names of people they thought could do a good job planning for the ESC. This process produced a list of 225 nominees. The Design Team also developed a rough social map of the ESC to represent "the system" (L_{11}). They aimed to have representation of each sector so that a microcosm of the whole ESC system was present in each meeting. Most of the nominees were contacted, but many interested people were not able to take part at the times the CSC was scheduled. Approximately 60 people agreed to participate.

Attendance had been good at the information sessions; the researchers and Design Team members had perceived an increasing interest, and felt that more people would have been involved if the information sessions could have been continued. The information sessions were a community-building process as people discussed the idea of creating a desirable future. Community members were made aware

that the CSC is more than just another research project or public consultation in which the organizers take the data for their own use; in addition, participants are expected to act locally to diffuse the search conference results and to grow their community.

Unfortunately, however, the process was rushed. Funding deadlines were looming on the horizon. Youth representation was not as significant as had been hoped for. Efforts were made to recruit more youth, but time deadlines made this difficult. Essentially, the constrained timeframe cut short the nomination process and forced us to schedule the CSC at a time when many nominees were unable to attend. In all, 47 participants were invited to meet in Cowansville, 49 were invited to meet in Lennoxville, and 59 were invited to meet in Orford. Approximately 20 participants agreed to attend at each venue. Of these 60, for various reasons, some were not able to participate throughout the entire process.

While attrition is to be expected when working with volunteers, starting with a larger number of participants would have helped in the achievement of a broader common ground at the end. This would have allowed the geographically dispersed ESC to act as a whole to sustain a longer implementation period and greater diffusion. The length of time any particular community takes to develop a sense of the importance and the potential of a CSC process cannot be accurately predicted in advance. People need time to think about the proposal for a CSC, talk with their neighbours and think about their involvement in their community and in the CSC process. Even though an extensive participant information kit was provided that clearly said they would be implementing their plans in action groups between 2009 and 2014, a survey of participants a year later showed that several participants did not understand this or the CSC process. Some thought they were just brainstorming. Some came just to be a part of it, to find out what it was about, or to network with others. Others expected to put forward their ideas to the experts and that was all. Few really understood and entered the CSC process with the understanding that they would implement their own plans with the help of other community members who had nominated them. In some cases they felt that they were not informed of this in the information sessions and were surprised when they were so informed at the beginning of the first weekend. As opposed to being actively engaged in creating their own future, many participants were expecting to be led through a process of brainstorming their ideas but not having to work through differences. Search Conference managers are well trained and able to manage this type of contingency, but it reduces the level of energy for productive creative work during the conference.

The Design Team explored various possible approaches, ranging from one big CSC to a CSC in each local community. In retrospect, it may have been more effective to work in smaller, more local clusters. On the other hand, regional affiliations and commonalities need to be bridged to create a common vision for the ESC as a whole. The pragmatics of funding and administration also enter into the decision concerning the number of CSC events and the amount of people who can be involved. After some discussion and a review of the literature, it was determined that using high schools as the convening locations would make good sense. Because the Eastern Townships has three regional English high schools, this meant there would be three CSC regional learning and planning processes, and almost anyone could reasonably travel to attend. It was also decided to provide accommodations, and three local inns were selected as the conference locations. This allowed participants to continue their discussions after work hours before retiring for the night.

It is possible to consider the next design decision, which was to hold all three CSCs in the three different venues on the same weekend, as a critical mistake. What happened in practice is that participants in one CSC did not know what was going on in the other two. Holding a series of CSCs, one each weekend for three weekends, might have allowed learning and transfer of knowledge over time and perhaps allowed for greater integration and agreement. This decision emerged early in the grant application process. It had to be part of the funding application, and so had to be made without significant community involvement. The researchers, Design Team members and co-conveners engaged in this discussion felt that there would be room for flexibility within the limits of the budget and timeline. However, the timeframe for the entire process was shorter than anticipated because of funding delays. This prevented re-scheduling the CSCs over a longer time period.

The three first weekend conferences went as planned with clear agreed-upon strategic intent statements emerging from each of the three conferences. The next step was to integrate all three conference outputs into one CSC for the ESC as a whole and to design a new community infrastructure to implement the agreed-upon strategic intent. An integration day was held the Saturday following the first three CSC regional meetings. A group of representatives from each of the three conferences presented their most desirable future (strategic intent) statements to the participants present from the other two CSCs. These were discussed, conflicts were resolved or recorded on a disagreed list, and the statements were revised until there was full agreement of all three representative groups. This should have meant that all partici-

pants across all three CSC groupings had the same desirable future statements for the ESC as a basis for action planning in their local regions on the third and final weekend.

The original plan called for the design of a network infrastructure to also be created on the integration day. The normal plan for an integration and design day is to allow 10 working hours, usually over an evening and the next day. However, due to distances travelled by some of the participants, the decision was made to start at 10 a.m. and to finish at 5 p.m. Even with a working lunch, the ESC participants had only 7 hours to complete both the integration task and the organization design. Consequently the search conference managers adapted the flow of the day, and mistakes were made.

Participants were rushed through the rationalization of conflict in order to get to the organization design phase. While there seemed to be complete agreement to the final integrated strategic intent statements at the time, it was later discovered that some participants were holding back, also because of time pressures.

Emery and de Guerre (2006) state that failures of implementation are known to be of two classes: poor search conference design and management, and failures to carry out agreed actions after the search conference. Implementation of agreed-upon actions depends on the quality of the preparation, good search conference management, and the structures consciously built into the implementation phase. These structures must provide the characteristics for productive group life and therefore bureaucracies are not effective (Emery, M., 1999). A modified participative design workshop was developed for this purpose (de Guerre, 2003). In this workshop, participants develop conscious conceptualization of the two organization design principles (bureaucracy or participative democracy) and learn why energy, learning and productivity are higher in democratic organizations based on the second design principle. They are then well prepared to maintain and diffuse the spirit and commitment they developed during the search conference process.

Because there was no time for a modified participative design workshop (de Guerre, 2003; Emery, M., & de Guerre, 2006), the managers presented a social infrastructure design that the community could use, and explained why it was important. Integration-day participants did some key parts of the modified participative design workshop so that they could experience and learn the meaning of the principles and their impact on energy, learning and productivity, but they did not design their own organization. Instead the managers asked in plenary what a typical implementation might look like, and then explained the alternative based on the second design principle. At the time it

appeared that participants understood, found it meaningful and were prepared to implement a networked organization based on the second principle. However, the participants later felt constrained by lack of funds because the research funding had run out, and they felt a lack of support from the co-conveners. Some said they felt they did all this good work and then were abandoned. These issues will be discussed in more detail below. Suffice it to say that while design and management mistakes were made, with proper funding, including perhaps the opportunity to extend the time period or to re-fund based on emergent contingencies, the design and management of the process may have had better results. Finally, at the integration session, the representatives from each CSC discussed what to present on the third weekend to their regional CSC groups, but they did not have time to plan their presentation in detail. They did this at home over the next week.

The next weekend, the integrated, rationalized and agreed-upon statements were presented to the three original search conference groupings by the respective representatives who had attended the one-day integration and rationalization-of-conflict session the previous weekend. Some participants in each search conference group immediately disagreed with one particular statement that spoke to equality for all citizens. Although much time and energy were invested, as will be explained later, this disagreement was never resolved to everyone's satisfaction. Because some were strongly committed to the notion of equality of services for all citizens, neither would the participants simply put it on the disagreed list and work on those items that were agreed upon by all. As they realized that they were stuck on this issue, the energy and hope of some participants significantly declined and consequently, although work was done on the third weekend to develop action plans, they were incomplete. In some cases, choosing volunteers to populate the organization designed on the second weekend was not easy because people were beginning to question their involvement and support. Rationalization of this conflict was attempted in a fourth meeting a few weeks later, but it was not well attended. In a final meeting between representatives of the action groups, co-conveners, and researchers, co-conveners also expressed strong disagreement with the intent to advocate for equality of services for all citizens, fearing that the approach would be counterproductive.

Results: A reliable method was less than successful

Fifteen future-direction statements (Figure 4) were agreed upon by the end of the third weekend and seven action groups (Figure 5) were formed to implement these statements. Each action group developed a nested series of action plans over the five years to 2014.

The networked organization structure created on the second weekend included a group comprised of representatives from each of the action groups. This group was to act as a body that would discuss issues across the whole of the Eastern Townships and convene all the action groups to report on their progress and seek ongoing rationalization of conflict and agreement and support of the whole.

1. The English-speaking community grows because of efforts to retain youth and encourage immigration by promoting the Townships as a growth region for business and quality of life.
2. We are proud of our English-language heritage. Our history and culture are taught and celebrated, and we have achieved a culture of preservation.
3. WE ARE LEADERS OF CHANGE!
4. We assume leadership in environmental preservation and sustainable community development.
5. We revitalize, support and link our institutions.
6. We increase Townships employment and economic opportunities.
7. We support and enhance our English-language media to better inform, reflect and advocate for us.
8. We achieve an English-language education system which fosters the development of bi-literate graduates, meets requirements in all areas of employment and entrepreneurship, and decreases out-migration.
9. We create opportunities for intergenerational dialogues and exchanges across all sectors of society.
10. Transportation and communication are funding priorities, better linking our region.
11. We have affordable housing and transportation.
12. We ensure equal access, ease of use and quality of government services for all residents in their language of choice.
13. We facilitate interactions between youth and provide opportunities and resources for them to be socially pro-active in their communities, in order to foster a sense of belonging.
14. In 2014, the English-speaking community has full access to health-care services at the local and regional levels.
15. We identify opportunities and create strong networks in the wider multi-lingual community, and foster understanding and mutual appreciation among cultures and language groups in the Eastern Townships.

Figure 4. Future Direction Statements

- 1. Culture and heritage of the Townships English-speaking community
- 2. Economic vibrancy
- 3. Education, especially bi-literacy for high school graduates
- 4. Sustainable social and physical development
- 5. Retaining youth, providing opportunities and resources for them and striving to develop a sense of belonging within their communities
- 6. Networking and leadership
- 7. Equal access, ease of use and quality of services for all residents

Figure 5. Implementation Action Groups

The networked organization structure (Figure 6) suggested by the managers during the second weekend was reviewed and agreed upon by all participants on the third weekend. Unfortunately, attendance was low on the third weekend. Thus, when the organization was populated, some action groups had only three members, which is not enough for effective action on the strategic intent statements. Obvi-

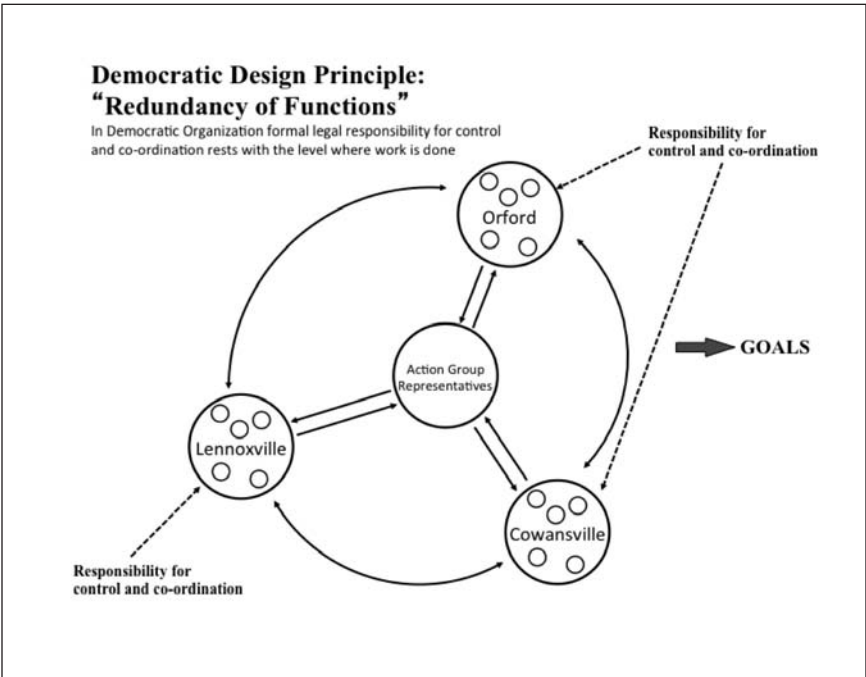


Figure 6. Networked Organization Structure for Implementation of Action Plans

ously, this was disappointing. It meant that their first task would be to recruit more members. The notion of three regions was kept and action groups were formed in each of the three regional areas, so that members would be able to travel to meet each other. It was hoped that e-mail, social media and other electronic means of communication would help each of the action groups and each of the three regions stay in touch with one another and with the Action Group Representatives. However, several people did not have adequate internet service and/or computer equipment and skills.

At the end of the CSC sessions, participants had questions about support from the co-conveners to develop effective means of staying in touch and communicating with each other. This support was not forthcoming, nor was it actively sought. The energy was just not present to develop a good proposal, building on their existing action plans from the CSC, and then to present it to the co-conveners in a convincing way. Over time the action groups floundered. A year later only two of the groups continued to function and the most active group was composed of three young people focused on “equal access, ease of use and quality of services for all residents.” This focus was a source of disagreement among key ESC members who withdrew their support and ceased attending meetings.

**Discussion: Diffusion occurs in unpredictable ways...
a better theory of diffusion is needed.**

The normal anticipated outcomes from the two-stage model of active adaptive action research are three-fold: a human or social system with a strategic plan aligned with the opportunities and constraints in the external environment over the planning horizon, a nested series of action plans to deliver the most desirable and achievable future for the system and the environment, and a participative democratic organization designed to implement the action plans. This organization is initially staffed by the participants involved in the research process and it normally expands as the ideas and actions are diffused through the broader community. In the case of the Eastern Townships, the co-conveners also hoped that existing and future community development initiatives could be strategically coordinated within the community strategic plan emerging from the CSC. A careful review of the outputs and further collaborative dialogue about how to support these developments over time could have helped the co-conveners achieve their objectives. However, because of the disagreement, participants were not sure what to publish to the co-conveners and the rest of the ESC.

The disagreement was strong enough to split the participants into two groups. Some of the older community leaders interpreted the stra-

tegic goal “to ensure equal access, ease of use and quality of government services for all residents in the language of their choice” as a direct challenge to the Quebec government law, commonly referred to as Bill 101, aiming to protect French as the official language of Quebec. The members of the action group working on this goal were primarily younger Townshippers, and both the content of their 5-year action plan and their way of talking about it were perceived by some as confrontational. Other participants and co-conveners stated repeatedly that a confrontational strategy did not work and would cause difficulty for the ESC. While they agreed with the goal, they preferred a quieter, more grassroots community development approach. The young members of the action group stated that they were fluently bilingual, had grown up under Bill 101, and respected it and their provincial government. They saw their strategy as informative, with no intent to be confrontational. However, other participants withdrew from the process and did not attend further meetings, although many stayed active informally. The co-conveners did not take leadership to resolve the issue; they were also concerned about associating their institution with what could be perceived as a radical confrontational strategy. A small research grant from the Centre for Human Relations and Community Studies at Concordia University allowed the researchers some ongoing relationship to the ESC through this period, and Townshippers’ Association engaged a series of interns from Bishop’s University to work as facilitators for the action group representatives. Several attempts were made to use the rationalization of conflict methodology that participants had learned during the CSC process, but to no avail, as key members of the community refused participate in the debate. In retrospect, it seems likely that the CSC process had surfaced an already existing split within the ESC. Perhaps this could also help explain why youth were not more engaged?

During the process, the researchers and search conference managers observed a clear consensus about the issues across the Townships. Essentially the members of the ESC saw the world in a similar way, held their shared history and heritage with pride, and identified the same desirable future. Members of the ESC have adapted to living in the Townships as a minority, and many were working on becoming more culturally bi-literate in addition to being bilingual, in order to understand, relate and participate more effectively within the dominant French-speaking culture. Several of the strategic goals stated this intent in some way. They agreed, for example, that their history and heritage should be preserved and taught to all Quebecers, that the English-language media should “better inform, reflect and advocate” for the ESC, that there should be an English-language education sys-

tem that “meets the requirements in all areas of employment and entrepreneurship and decreases out-migration,” and that the ESC has full access to health-care services. These issues and strategies were developed in three separate CSC regions and they were agreed upon during the integration day. Thus, the overlap and similarities of ESC members were consistent across the Eastern Townships.

Besides their disagreement, another factor in the co-conveners’ not taking leadership together was, perhaps, that the group had not been built strongly enough in the preparation and follow-through stages. Perhaps both the researchers and the Design Team assumed during the preparation stage that all the co-conveners knew each other and would be interested in supporting this broad-front initiative in the follow-up stage. In retrospect, more work with the co-conveners to discuss and jointly plan the follow-up phase would have been advisable.

Because the preparation stage took so long and the overall CSC process took 3 years, including 1 year of implementation, staff changes in some of the co-convenor institutions may also have affected their capacity to support the CSC in conflict. This experience raises the question of how to work with longitudinal collaborative community-based action research processes in today’s context and within existing funding formulas. We think this question requires challenging some of our basic assumptions and models of emergent action research in which both the researched and the researcher jointly share responsibility. At their final meeting, the co-conveners received the report of the participants and the search conference managers, and agreed to take leadership to assist the development of the action groups. However, this never happened. Because there was disagreement, the co-conveners were not clear about how to proceed. They had questions about how public the results were and whether or not there would be any financial and administrative support; several of the co-conveners pointed out that they were not asked for financial or in-kind support. The action groups and the action group representatives seemed to be waiting for the resolution of their conflict. They seemed paralyzed and stuck. The researchers had not predicted this: in normal circumstances, even in cases where there are extreme differences, participants have new insights and new integrations following search conferences, and community institutions are happy to take the new energy and further develop it.

This is a classic case of fight/flight group dynamics. When a basic assumption of fight/flight hits a group, people stop communicating effectively (Bion, 1962). They do not hear each other; they misinterpret and mistrust each other. Some chose to stick to their position and fight, while others choose to run away (flight). The CSC participants

were split, some withdrew their participation and others struggled on, but with no support. As opposed to the positive affect and high trust required for diffusion, more negative affect was apparent than is usual. In the follow-up survey one year after the last CSC meeting, some participants expressed significant frustration and disappointment with the results. They felt that while the researchers and the search conference managers had contributed positively, members of their own ESC had let them down and there was some bitterness about that. Unknown to the participants, the search conference managers also expressed disappointment and frustrations as they watched what had become a vibrant CSC community disintegrate before their eyes. A social evening was organized to celebrate and discuss whether and how to go on, but only six people attended.

Several of the action groups continued to meet, but at the end of the first year only one group was truly active. During the year, the search conference community did not meet as a whole as was originally planned. In the survey at the end of the first year, 49% of participants said that the CSC did not meet their expectations very well or did not meet them at all.

With no formal diffusion mechanism, diffusion is happening informally. People reported that they continued to talk with each other. Co-conveners have found new local leadership and new volunteers, and report more cooperation amongst themselves, and a new awareness of informal, local, individual and small groups working toward building a more vibrant ESC with broad agreement and awareness of their commonalities and their differences. Townshippers' strategic planning committee is discussing a new collaborative framework and an annual forum and, in general, community organizations seem more open to strategic coordination of development initiatives, particularly perhaps in the health and social services sector. Among youth, former CSC participants are playing key roles in a new Townships-wide Youth Council affiliated with Townshippers' Association.

Conclusions

The main conclusion is that there is not a good fit between funding application, administration procedures and collaborative action research approaches such as the two-stage model of active adaptive action research. While funding agencies understandably want some certainty, collaborative action research approaches in communities are emergent and inherently uncertain. To bridge this gap, researchers and community leaders need to work together to meet funding timelines and improve planning, while funding agencies need to allow for the unpredictability of emergent issues in action research.

For researchers and community partners, the questions are two-fold. When does a community development process become AR, which in addition to solving a real world problem provides new social science knowledge? And when do we apply for financial support? In this case, more time on the ground in the Townships might have provided researchers with the capacity to better predict the potential social science outcomes. Then the question becomes, who pays for this preparation time?

In retrospect, it is clear that the researchers should have sought funding for the follow-up and diffusion phase to the CSC process. However, had everything gone as expected, this would not normally have been necessary as co-conveners would be applying for funding to support active community development action groups. The requirement for more follow-up and support in this project was necessitated by the adverse group dynamics and the inability of the ESC to agree. The only thing to do would be to re-convene the initial participants and to return to local dialogue sessions to involve more people and to help the co-conveners to take more leadership. However, with co-conveners and other participants being so strongly and vocally against one of the action groups, it is uncertain whether anything would have helped.

For ESC members, interest, informal conversations and local actions continue. Some commented on a weak sense of belonging and cultural identity. Several of the participants in the CSC said that it was good to meet their neighbours and just to know that there were others like themselves. ESC leaders might consider that communities are local and both English and French. The whole system was never really in the room. Although French-speaking Townshippers were invited if they were interested in the ESC, none came.

A wider contextual viewpoint could be that the ESC in Quebec is deeply split over the approach to take to maintain a sense of identity and belonging, and this split emerged in the CSC on the third and final weekend. The implementation of their desired future was blocked by their own inability to resolve this conflict. Historically and deeply, this issue has been an important community characteristic that is worthy of further research. In some ways, the ESC's inability to take charge of creating its own future for fear, amongst other issues, of upsetting the majority is a characteristic of a socially depressed population. Indeed, some participants expressed a sense of hopelessness and despair, assuming that the most probable future for the ESC was ongoing disintegration and decline.

The ESC needs ongoing and flexible financial support to continue positive community development initiatives. These may have to

include learning to use the rationalization of conflict as an ongoing strategy if the community is to survive and create a desirable future for the ESC in the Eastern Townships. As part of the CSC process, participants examine their history and heritage and select aspects they wish to develop and preserve. CSC participants said they wanted to drop their resistance to change and their overprotective barriers, and they wanted to create a new structure to integrate the ESC across the regions.

The CSC process was extensive, involving, energizing and frustrating. Lengthy and serious discussions in each region identified many issues and opportunities, agreements were made and a firm direction towards a desirable future was expressed. There is much ongoing work to do to pull the community together, resolve differences and build capacity to act in meaningful ways towards that desirable future direction. We sincerely hope that this paper is helpful in that process.

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