Publishing in the borderlands of mainstream and margins:

A prologue to Mary Lane’s

People, Power, Participation: Living Community Development

Jacques Boulet
Borderlands Co-operative
www.borderlands.org.au

It has taken me a long time to find an appropriate starting point for this prologue to Mary Lane’s wonderful account of a life dedicated to community work in its many aspects and appearances. First, there was the genuine question as to how one introduces a work such as this...? How to do justice to the wealth of a lifetime experience which the book itself cannot even do justice to, given limitations of space, time (not to mention our twitter- and other social media-damaged attention spans). Then, there’s the paradoxical reality of Community Development seemingly disappearing from the programs of educational and training institutions whilst demand for its requisite skills seems to spread if not grow, both because and in spite of the conservative political and rather wobbly economic realities we inhabit. Finally, in an age of disappearing publishers and bookshops, why would a few small and rather vulnerable community groups want to get involved in bringing out a book like Mary’s? even if community activism (...Occupy!) and the search for alternatives (...community-based economics!) seem to be growing and spreading apace…?

So here, dear reader, is the story of how decisions towards this publication unfolded...

When Mary approached Jim and myself – meanwhile more than a year ago – to discuss her book project, she wanted advice about where to go with the manuscript (in her typical understated fashion, she expressed doubt as to whether her ‘memoirs’ would be of interest to anyone, but that friends and colleagues had urged her to write and publish them). Given my involvement with the Borderlands Cooperative and the New Community Quarterly (now New Community), she also wondered whether I (and Jim, whose ‘endnote’ you’ll find at the end of the book) could offer any suggestions about content and scope. As it turned out, we became much more deeply involved in the project and we have met with Mary several times, discussed every chapter and – since we share ‘pre-boomer’ ages – we compared ‘notes’ from our respective activist and community development experiences (Jim across Australia, Canada, East Timor; I from involvements in Belgium, the Congo, Germany and other European countries, the US, Australia and Hong Kong) and we really enjoyed the convergence of our ways of reflecting back and about what it could all mean for today’s praxis.

All three of us had doubts about established publishers’ potential interest in the ‘risky’ enterprise of publishing a book which is as biographical and reflective as Mary’s and which deliberately shies away from offering ‘easy-to-do recipes’ to change your community (and the world in one fell swoop). We discussed self-publishing or finding a willing organisation who would see purpose and virtue in sharing the work with its already established audience and – quite naturally - came to consider whether ‘we’ could try and ‘do’ it. The Borderlands and New Community managing groups were
interested and without any of the now fashionable ‘risk mitigation’ strategies in place, here we are! Of the two risks – depriving the resurgent interest in community development of a necessary source of inspiration and historical learning and wisdom or the possibility of a publishing disaster – we opted for the second. Indeed, we find People, Power, Participation a necessary work for difficult – but also promising – times in a regressive political-economic and ideological environment, the genesis of which is amply documented in Mary’s book and resistance to which is equally and forcefully argued throughout – and which is shared by Borderlands and New Community.

The Borderlands Co-operative (www.borderlands.org.au), the Institute for Community Development (www.icd.org.au) and the New Community journal (www.newcq.org) are indeed honoured and delighted to offer Mary Lane’s experiences and wise reflections to everyone interested and involved in Community Development in Australia and beyond. And it is good to know that it will be in good company, as Peter Westoby and his colleagues in Brisbane have been publishing several volumes recently and the next fully revised edition of Jim’s book is about to ‘hit the market’ in the middle of the year (with Cambridge University Press).

For most, however, the Borderlands Co-operative may not be a known entity; so you do deserve some explanation, dear reader!

We launched ourselves at the end of 1997, although the genesis of the ‘dream’ reaches back well into the first half of the nineties when the first effects of the imposition of economic rationalism (neo-liberalism) in Australia started to bite, especially in the so-called ‘community sector’ and in education. In 1992, the incoming conservative state government in Victoria, inspired by Thatcher and Reagan, set about cutting (social) spending, resulting in the elimination of thousands of small community-based organisations, the suspension of local government, the closure of hundreds of schools, all the while heavily investing in the ‘big end’ of town. Thousands of experienced people in the ‘sector’ lost their jobs and program funding regimes became fully calibrated with the ideologies and practicalities of the imposed neo-classical economic modalities. Federally, after the Keating Labor government had already introduced similar processes (who does not remember the ‘banana republic’ metaphor?), the incoming Howard government encountered little resistance to its own even more conservative version of neo-liberalism. Universities and TAFEs were forced to adopt the market-utilitarian approach in education and training, hollowing-out - if not destroying - many a time-honoured program, replacing them with narrowly-defined ‘competencies’, the acquisition of which would assure the production of expected ‘outcomes’ when applied in ‘real-life’ situations. And so it went on…. And so it still is….

Being involved in meetings and discussions within and across the networks of a number of Melbourne-based activists led me to wonder about the possibilities of resistance to the conservative ‘onslaught’ and how spaces for alternative forms of work and living could be maintained and how new ones could be created. After 25 years in academia, I found the growing and encroaching restrictions stifling – even prohibitive of real learning – and resigned from my university job. Together with a group of interested friends from the community, ecological and international solidarity networks, we developed the idea of creating a ‘place’ where we could re-
group and start to imagine, create and practice alternative ways of being and doing, more commensurate with our ideals and more responsive to what we saw as an increasingly precarious living context, locally, nationally and globally.

In a letter I wrote to invite people to its launch on the 21st of December 1997, I described the following four areas as Borderlands’ tentative ‘mission’…

1. **The need for a profound re-development of our local communities.** In many ways, processes of globalisation and (increasing) individualism have eroded whatever was left of them. Efforts are being made, all over the world, to maintain what’s left of them and/or to restore them in appropriate ways...

2. **The need for more ecologically sustainable local (suburban) living.** It seems therefore necessary to at least attempt to develop more sustainable forms of living in the suburbs – ‘sustainable’ not only understood in a purely material way, but including the more spiritual and ethical dimension as to how we (should) deal with and are (should be) connected to the space/place we inhabit.

3. **The need for international and inter-cultural learning, exchange and awareness.** As the world has become "smaller", the distance between people seems to become ever greater and the inequalities and injustices in the areas of development and cross-cultural relationship have worsened. In addition to respectfully listen to those who have in the past been oppressed, exploited, neglected or worse, we ‘westerners’ need to do our own "homework" and get a better understanding of "where we come from", what our identity is, so as to practice the necessary (re-)conciliation with the former groups and peoples.

4. **The need for critical (self-)reflection and for active and participatory research.** The worlds of science, research and academia have grown more and more remote from every-day awareness and consciousness of "normal" people. We swallow whatever "experts" of all kinds (but especially economic and political "experts") tell us is the "truth", powerfully reinforced by media (mis)information. Meanwhile, every-day communication seems to acquire a consumerist shallowness which powerfully prevents the emergence of a more critical consciousness and thus undermines deliberate change based upon such consciousness.

As I resigned from university (which, in true economic-rationalist fashion, had decided to ‘downsize’ and ask its staff to ‘produce’ more with less resources…), the small ‘redundancy package’ I had obtained helped in paying two years of rent for a few classrooms attached to a local church; it also assisted Borderlands in becoming a co-operative in 1998. We chose to become a co-operative because we believe it to best represent our ideals of democratic decision-making and of the need to continue to educate ourselves. As well, as a not-for-profit ‘business’, that form of incorporation would assist us to realise our dreams of social justice, redistribution of resources and the highest possible degree of participation by our members/shareholders and contributors.

The Borderlands Co-operative has been active in community-based and participatory practice/action research and evaluation, organisational and community development, international solidarity work; we have been active across many areas fitting under the wide umbrella of ‘community and social issues’, including domestic violence, volunteering, community-based economics, sustainability and others. We have been involved in almost a hundred projects of small to medium size over the fifteen years of our existence and have assisted individuals, groups and other organisations in
‘incubating’ their good ideas, sharing office infrastructure, networks, ‘bartering’ labour, supporting one another with volunteering and other resources.

Briefly, we try to ‘be’ community in our ways of practicing, in together reflecting on and collaborating in joint projects and programs, to pursue the ideal of sharing space and time, to engage in reciprocity and mutual beneficial relating and learning to give the collective a chance in preference to the relentless pursuit of individual interest and benefit. We keep our processes and structural arrangements as simple as possible, trusting the quality of our cooperative practices and relationships to guide us and make the right decisions (rather than overly depend on regulations and fixed roles descriptions).

So why would we want to spread Mary’s ‘story’ of her involvement in Community Development?

Borderlands’ (and my personal) understanding of CD is entirely commensurate with the one reverberating throughout Mary’s account of her own learning processes, as she moved from being an engaged community member, to becoming a professional community worker and on to becoming an academic, teaching community development and accompanying social work students in their learning and activism on placements and in projects.

Let me elaborate a bit on this understanding…

In the hands of the authors of the countless available CD ‘toolkits’ – indeed, in the ‘hands’ of many public and private agencies auspicing or funding CD projects – the approach has been severely instrumentalised. It has become mainly a set of technical instructions (often exhortations) to be applied to an assumed objective reality ‘out there’, following predetermined ‘steps’ in a (mostly) linear process and for which one has to be trained and – usually – have gained some form of accreditation. Like Mary, we react against a conception of CD which understands it as the ‘task’ of a certain ‘unit’ or ‘division’ within a government department or an agency, or as the domain of certain ‘specialists’ who will ‘do’ CD, whilst everyone else in the department/agency continues to ‘do’ their labour-divided and specialist ‘interventions’ or ‘performances’ for which they have been trained and for which they are paid …

Against such compartmentalisation and ‘silo-ing’, we suggest that community development – the ‘development of community’ - should be understood as a ‘working principle’ or a generic task and capability for all working in the ‘community’ sector who are, in some way, relating with people as they implement the program(s) or range of programs of an agency, a local council or government department or of any organisation, really.

A principle is the expression of a basic or essential value or quality according to which one orients one’s actions and relational practices; it thus refers to the reason or rationale why one acts the way one does. A working principle, consequently, implies that, like a ‘working definition,’ the principle is not yet ‘ready,’ not yet completely elaborated; it is continuously in the process of refinement, of re-direction, of being enacted. As societal reality proceeds through human action and interaction, the working principle becomes part of that process, is dialectically related to it; it is preliminary
and yet orients and directs action and is simultaneously changed by it as it is ‘applied’ to the concrete situation and context in which it is deployed. While working with or ‘imbued’ by the principle, it will prove its truth, its validity in the ‘operational’ space in which it is engaged; it will be reflected upon, transformed and further verified as it develops as a ‘touchstone’ in the relational practice it is applied to and within.

Hence, a **working principle of community development** is a general maxim, which assists in orienting professional (or ‘service delivery’ or policy-based) action(s) or interventions in and across different fields of practice. A working principle thus should exert integrating power in several ways; it should integrate/translate between:

- theory and practice
- different methodical/technical approaches and ‘interventions’
- diverse (social) scientific disciplines
- and it should interpenetrate with the ‘on-going-ness’ of daily living of those we relate with in the course of our work where it becomes transformative.

And this, I feel, resonates strongly with Mary’s ‘story’ and her evolving understanding – and ‘use’ – of community development in her practice across the institutional domains she has progressively been involved in.

Further, as already suggested above, our way of thinking about and practicing CD is more adequately expressed as ‘the development of community’, therewith heeding the by now well-established critique of the concept of ‘development’, especially as it has been and continues to be used in the context of international ‘aid’ and ‘development’. Rather, we consider ‘community’ as a relational system which is to be ‘developed’ and improved as such, i.e. in its relational capability.

For Mary, like for Borderlands, community is to be recognised and validated as a living and to be re-empowered entity, rather than something to be appealed to when governments and (big) business want to enact their parasitic appeals to the population – especially when addressing the disadvantaged sections thereof – to not become ‘dependent’ on their assumed largesse. Instead, we would like to see communities and their members enabled to – again - claim their rightful share in the collectively generated wealth of the commons against the appropriation of that wealth by – what has now come to be referred to as – ‘the 1%’… And we would like to see community recognised again as a necessary and essential social and psychological complement to what makes us human – complementary, that is, to the - meanwhile pathological – emphasis on us as primarily self-contained and self-sufficient individuals.

I commend Mary’s – and Jim’s – writing to you and I’m sure that you’ll find their contributions worthy of consideration and - most importantly – of imitation!