

# Articles

## The Role and Impact of Continuing Education on Rural Revitalization: A Case Study

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### ABSTRACT

This article presents the findings of a study that explored the role and impact of continuing education on rural revitalization. A community development approach, academic expertise, and a university's resources were used to assist the citizens of Montmartre, Saskatchewan, to establish Centre 48, an arts and continuing education centre. Courses provided by Centre 48 gave townspeople and people from the surrounding area opportunities to explore new interests and to develop new social networks; in turn, the social capital gained by establishing and operating Centre 48 gave rise to new economic ventures. The results of

### RÉSUMÉ

Dans cet article, l'auteur présente les résultats d'une étude où elle explora le rôle et l'impact de l'éducation permanente sur la revitalisation rurale. L'auteur a utilisé une approche de développement communautaire, de l'expertise académique, et des ressources de l'université pour assister les citoyens de Montmartre en Saskatchewan, à établir le Centre 48 – un centre d'arts et d'éducation permanente. Les cours offerts par Centre 48 ont donné aux villageois et aux gens des environs des occasions pour explorer de nouveaux intérêts et pour développer de nouveaux réseaux sociaux ; en revanche, le capital social acquis par l'établissement et

this study illustrate how university continuing education units can contribute to capacity building in rural communities and how such social capital-building projects can serve as a catalyst for economic development.

la mise sur pied du Centre 48 a provoqué la naissance de nouvelles initiatives économiques. Les résultats de cette étude illustrent comment des unités d'éducation permanente universitaire peuvent contribuer à la création de capacités dans la collectivité rurale, et comment des projets d'investissement dans la société peuvent servir comme catalyseurs de développement économique.

## INTRODUCTION

There are compelling reasons for examining the role and impact of continuing education on rural revitalization. In the case of the Centre for Continuing Education (CCE) at the University of Regina, in Saskatchewan, fostering rural revitalization fulfills the CCE's vision to contribute to the intellectual, economic, social, and cultural development of the communities it serves. As the outreach arm of the University of Regina, the CCE offers accessible training and education programs to learners of all ages and builds on the strengths and resources available at both the community and university levels. The Centre both meets the non-credit continuing education needs of the residents of Regina and provides distance education courses for credit to rural communities. What other models, then, besides distance education could the CCE use to support continuing education in rural areas?

The benefits of continuing education programming for personal and work-related reasons and for increased access to university resources are well documented. In contrast, the role and impact of continuing education on rural revitalization is not. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) 1999 project report *Overcoming Social Exclusion Through Adult Learning* attests to the effectiveness of locally based learning initiatives in combating social exclusion and economic disadvantage. For McGivney (2000), recovering the concept of outreach by actively engaging communities is vital, especially if adult educators are to mitigate social exclusion and contribute to lifelong learning and community regeneration.

Over the years, the Government of Saskatchewan has supported its rural communities with grants for arts-based initiatives; however, there has been no comparable funding for continuing education programs. Instead, the government's strategy for rural regeneration has focused on learning related

to labour-market and economic needs. This strategy ignores the value of learning that comes from participating in social and cultural activities, learning that ultimately leads to economic development (OECD, 1999). Moreover, even though the role of the arts in community regeneration and community development has been accepted, the difficulty in articulating its impact has also been acknowledged. For example, Kay (2000) stated:

It would appear then that arts projects located in communities have a valuable role to play in social and economic development. Evidence indicates they can contribute to the overall regeneration of an area using predominantly people-centred strategies within a community development framework. The problem, however, is in measuring and valuing that contribution. (p. 417)

## ADULT EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

In contrast to earlier days when the pioneers of adult education saw community development as a "holistic strategy for adult education," over the last two decades, adult education and community development have been treated as "separate conceptual entities" (Hamilton, 1992, p. xiv). At the same time, continuing education at the university level has faced many of the same challenges as its parent institution, including decreased levels of funding that have pushed continuing education (CE) units toward cost-recovery programming, increased competition, rapid changes in technology, an increasingly diverse student population, and demands for increased accountability. To aid in cost recovery, North American CE units, although greatly diverse in their programming, have responded by providing formal education through distance delivery and special sessions and by offering education and training programs to working professionals. In the United Kingdom, many CE units responded by reducing their programming in rural areas. Recently, however, there has been renewed interest in outreach among adult educators as universities have begun to discuss "community engagement," a discussion that has coincided with universities wanting to be more responsive and accountable to their communities.

This article is based on a study in which the director of the CCE at the University of Regina, acting as both a researcher and an unpaid community consultant, used a community development approach that focused on the building capacity of the residents of Montmartre, Saskatchewan, to help those residents establish and implement their own arts and continuing education centre. To this end, she not only shared her knowledge of, and expertise in, operating continuing education centres but also linked the community of Montmartre to the university's resources.

According to Chaskin, Brown, Venkatesh, and Vidal (1999), "Community capacity is the interaction of human capital, organizational resources, and social capital existing within a given community that can be leveraged to solve collective problems and improve or maintain the well-being of that community" (p. 7). From the outset, the citizens of Montmartre had a strong sense of community and a commitment to establish what eventually came to be called Centre 48. However, in addition to a sense of community and commitment, before a community can take action, it must have the capacity to solve problems and to access resources beyond its immediate locality (Chaskin et al., 1999); thus, the director focused her efforts on these latter two characteristics of capacity building. It would appear that the field of adult education's interest in bettering communities, as well as serving individuals, is the thread that connects continuing education and community development.

## ORIGINS OF THE STUDY

In early January 2002, the director of the CCE received an email from one of Montmartre's community leaders—the future chairperson of Centre 48's Steering Committee. In her email, this individual inquired about creating new and innovative community-based education programs that would make use of the local facilities and workforce. As a member of Montmartre's recently formed Economic Development Committee, the future chairperson was responsible for exploring opportunities to develop and offer educational programs.

Montmartre, a rural farming community of 500 people, is located 50 minutes southeast of Regina on Highway 48. Like other rural communities, it faces a number of challenges: declining population, a potential school closure, and an overall downturn in the local economy. In towns like Montmartre, the importance of giving residents increased access to "arts" and other continuing education programs in order to make the community a more attractive place to live is underscored. At a time when rural school budgets for arts- and music-related programming have been cut or eliminated, residents are forced to drive an hour or more, or even to relocate, in order to access cultural activities. Community-based programs, such as the one Montmartre wanted to establish, are therefore vital if rural communities are to keep existing families and attract new residents.

The director responded immediately to this email request, offering to examine the potential of education programs that could contribute to the economic and social development of Montmartre and the surrounding region. In this way, the University of Regina began its relationship with Montmartre. A Steering Committee, composed of 12 volunteers representing

both Montmartre and nearby rural communities, was formed to provide overall direction and governance for Centre 48. The CCE director primarily used email to consult with the chairperson of the Steering Committee on all aspects of establishing and implementing the new centre. The director also provided the committee with professional development opportunities, including workshops on marketing and cost recovery, and coordinated efforts between Montmartre and the CCE's Conservatory of Performing Arts to provide the services of professional musicians for concerts and as instructors for music lessons.

The process led to a unique partnership between the university and this informal community-based organization, a partnership that gave the community local control over all aspects of the organization and delivery of the programs, while the university offered its expertise and resources. Since its inception, Centre 48 has become a successful arts and continuing education centre, offering classes (most of them held in Montmartre School) to over 1,800 students in 12 different communities in rural eastern Saskatchewan. Moreover, it has injected approximately \$180,000 into the local economy and created over 150 part-time instructor jobs and two permanent part-time positions.

## STUDY METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the study was to investigate the role and impact of continuing education on rural revitalization as exemplified by the partnership between the CCE at the University of Regina and the rural community of Montmartre. The director of the CCE initiated the research at the same time as she facilitated the development of the programming partnership. A potential benefit of this research was the development of a partnership model that would be applicable to other communities where lack of access to continuing education programs is a common problem. It was also hoped that the community of Montmartre, in particular, could use the results of this research in a practical way, since it would provide an overall assessment of Centre 48's achievements and articulate its role in rural regeneration.

Although the study was not undertaken as community-based research, it employed many elements of the community-based research model identified by Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, and Donohue (2003). These elements included collaboration with community members to identify the problem, the development of questions and a resulting report for the community, the sharing of knowledge and expertise, and, finally, addressing other community priorities as a result of the experience gained from establishing Centre 48. Data for this qualitative case study of Montmartre were collected from three sources: group interviews, the email correspondence between

the chairperson and the director, and other documents such as newspaper accounts and reports. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three community groups: Centre 48 program participants and parents of participants; Centre 48 Steering Committee members; and Montmartre's community leaders (including the current and the former mayor of Montmartre, the village administrator, and school-board members). An individual interview was conducted with the chairperson.

A list of questions was prepared to explore the community's experience with Centre 48 and the community's future needs. As a researcher, the director was able to probe and explore within the areas of inquiry. The chairperson, using a telephone script prepared by the director, contacted potential interview participants, who were then sent a follow-up letter from the director confirming the details of the group interviews, which were held in Montmartre over two successive weeks in the village office boardroom. All three groups were asked how Centre 48 had affected them, their families, and the community. Program participants (and parents of participants) were asked about their most positive/negative experience with Centre 48, what could have been done differently/better in the first year of operation, what classes or services could be offered in the future to better serve their needs, and the opportunities they saw for Centre 48's future. Steering Committee members were asked to describe their role and the role of the Steering Committee in the process, what they learned from their experience as Steering Committee members, how the university's partnership with Centre 48 could be strengthened, the major challenges to the centre's future, and the major issues concerning the survival of similar communities. Montmartre's community leaders were also asked about their role with respect to Centre 48, the future opportunities for the centre, and what could be done to help the rural community survive.

All of the interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed, and subsequently analyzed for recurring themes. Through qualitative inquiry, the themes derived from the interviews were brought to life through the words and quotations of each participant. The email correspondence between the chairperson and the director was a particularly rich source of data. It was, in a sense, a running account of Centre 48's development, the highs and lows experienced by the chairperson and others involved in the centre's creation, and the mutual learning that took place in a consultative relationship. This email correspondence was not only the means through which the director shared her experience and expertise in establishing and implementing continuing education programs but also the medium through which much of the problem solving with respect to Centre 48 occurred. Although analysis of documents such as letters is a common source of data in qualitative research, there is little or nothing in similar research that refers specifically to the analysis of email

correspondence. In this instance, the correspondence was subject to the same content-analysis procedures as the interviews. A third source of data was the analysis of documents, including newspaper accounts and press releases written by the chairperson that chronicled Centre 48's journey, program marketing and promotional materials, and a variety of strategic planning and budgeting reports generated by the Steering Committee.

## STUDY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

The central focus of the study was to identify the degree to which Centre 48 had impacted the community of Montmartre. During the examination of the process of initiating and establishing Centre 48, other related issues emerged—leadership, partnerships, operating on a regional basis, and financial matters that further affected the community. Overall, the data suggested that Centre 48 had had a significant influence on both the personal development of community members and on the social and economic development of Montmartre. Seven themes emerged from the research: personal development, social development, economic development, regional community interdependence, sustainable funding, leadership, and the importance of educational partnerships.

### *Personal Development*

Study participants noted that Centre 48 had conducted community surveys to determine interests and ensure attendance. Throughout each of the three group interviews, the participants emphasized that having access to classes for both adults and children created learning opportunities that would not have otherwise existed. They also frequently mentioned an appreciation for the variety of courses and the exposure to new interests offered by the centre. Arts education seemed to have had the strongest impact on individuals. As one participant said, "Violin and guitar lessons are here now and the community is excited to have these services." Fitness and sport programming was also appreciated, and these types of classes reported strong enrolment. This appreciation was reflected in this participant's comments: "The running class was good. Since the class, locals have formed a regular running group. The class acted as a catalyst for future activity. Some individuals even ran in the Queen City Marathon in Regina."

### *Social Development*

Study participants also identified a link between Centre 48 and the development of the community as a whole. The chairperson described a "sense of vibrancy, pride, and togetherness." Access to educational and recreational services made small-town life more appealing and afforded its residents an

opportunity to support the community. In fact, one individual stated that "Centre 48 has people wanting to stay in a small town because there is more to do than just stay home, go to hockey games and the local co-op." Another remarked that "the centre has been used as an example of a community fighting for survival—innovative and proactive."

Participants believed that Centre 48 provided the community with a sense of optimism. They noted that classes would make small-town life more appealing and encourage people to stay and support the community. One participant commented that "the centre is concrete, providing opportunity and hope that small towns can be revitalized." Participants also pointed out that Centre 48 had brought the community of Montmartre closer together, as evidenced by the willingness of its residents to work together on other community projects, and provided a forum for residents to meet people from other communities, thereby increasing community cohesion and intercommunity co-operation. Montmartre's community leaders especially noted the importance of "reaching out past next-door neighbours" to involve the community and support each other as a group in order to stay alive as a rural community.

### *Economic Development*

Participants in all interview categories acknowledged a link between Centre 48 and the economic development of the community. For example, a class held at the local greenhouse was seen as spurring business for both the greenhouse and the local economy. As the owner of the greenhouse commented:

We put together flowerpots for a class at my greenhouse business. I got to teach the class and get paid and everyone bought the supplies from me. What else could I ask for! Plus, it generated new orders for my business and gave inexperienced gardeners skills to garden, which can create new customers.

Participants also recognized that taking a class in their local community, instead of going to the bigger urban centres, not only created employment for local teachers but also drew people from other communities who would then shop in town. Indeed, Montmartre business and restaurant owners noticed an increase in business when Centre 48 held events in the community. In addition to employing a half-time administrator and numerous local instructors, Centre 48 employed an administrator for a playschool program at the Montmartre School. Five new small businesses were started after the centre opened, and the community strengthened its ties with its local Regional Economic Development Authority (REDA) to explore additional

economic-development opportunities. All of these results were seen as an economic benefit for the community.

In response to the question "What do you see as the major issues concerning the survival of communities similar to yours?" the members of the Steering Committee and Montmartre's community leaders unanimously agreed that while Centre 48's educational and commercial components were important, the community needed big business or big industry. As one of them noted, "[We] need industry; otherwise there are no jobs, no people, and no young families." They also believed that community leaders were responsible for increasing industry and, hence, economic prosperity in their community.

The group interviews and the email correspondence reaffirmed the belief that although Centre 48's arts and continuing education classes had had an effect on participants' personal growth and on the cultural, social, and economic development of Montmartre, the classes alone were not sufficient to stimulate the economic development required for sustainability. Unless it could establish some major business or industry in the area, Montmartre would continue to be vulnerable to population loss. In an effort to deal with this issue, Montmartre's Economic Development Committee decided to explore farm tours and actively pursue business-incubator projects.

Social capital refers to the features of social organizations such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and co-operation for mutual benefit (Putnam, 2000). Through the process of establishing and operating Centre 48, the community was revitalized and the social capital necessary for pursuing other economic endeavours was created. Community members acquired new skills in leadership, project management, and partnership development that resulted in the creation of five new small businesses. In other words, Centre 48 became the means to an end, not an end in itself. The belief that community development should address not only economic but also social and cultural development is highlighted in several studies pertaining to rural community development and rural schools (Hamilton, 1992; Kay, 2000; Miller, 1995).

### *Regional Community Interdependence*

The importance of small communities not going it alone, but rather working collaboratively with other communities to achieve economic, cultural, and social development, is well documented (Korsching & Borich, 1996; Morse, 2004; Stabler & Olfert, 1994). Based on the experience of other Saskatchewan communities, the concept of a regional centre—a centre that would serve both the community of Montmartre and other nearby small communities—was adopted.

We [Montmartre] realized we had to foster good will in the region and include neighbouring communities. The reasoning here was three-fold: one was because we certainly needed to pool our efforts in order to create a larger and broader market base, and two was because if we alienated other communities, we would make ourselves a target in the increasingly competitive struggle for survival. The third reason was that communities that had thrived/prospered, according to the Stabler study, are ones that had worked closely with area communities to create a regional trading area. (personal communication with Centre 48 chairperson)

Towns within a 75-kilometre radius of Montmartre, including the Carry the Kettle First Nation, initially determined the region. The inclusion of representatives from within this region on the Steering Committee was deemed to be positive. However, the Steering Committee respondents noted that Centre 48 had problems attracting new members to the committee because of the competitive nature of small communities. Moreover, they observed that the farther away a small community was located, the more likely it was to participate. One way to lessen the competition that exists between neighbouring rural communities is to hold classes at other centres, which has been Centre 48's strategy.

### *Sustainable Funding*

Concern about funding was both an issue from the onset of the study and a recurring theme identified through the analysis of the study data. The CCE director encouraged Centre 48 to operate on a cost-recovery basis, a financial arrangement widely practiced by CE units in higher education. It is an entrepreneurial model, whereby the unit covers its operational costs with revenue generated, for the most part, from course tuition. Steering Committee members were concerned that Centre 48's costs would not be covered through tuition alone and this, in turn, reflected concerns about its sustainability. Adding to this was the misapprehension that the solid course enrolments in the centre's first year were due to the backing of the community rather than ongoing need; however, strong enrolments in the second year allayed these fears and proved ongoing need. Without the ability to control its own finances, Centre 48 would have lost its community-based focus, including the ability to make decisions about future programming and strategic development and growth.

Small-scale funding for rural community development has been recognized as a key component of successful development in rural communities (Osborne, Beattie, & Williamson, 2002). However, Centre 48's decision to apply for grants from the provincial government and various corporations initially met with limited success, as neither recognized Centre 48 as a

legitimate entity for funding. Furthermore, small communities are typically reluctant to engage in ventures such as Centre 48 because they believe that a significant amount of money is required. Montmartre's experience, however, suggests that communities can, in fact, accomplish a great deal with a small amount of start-up money. Although funding was seen as a major challenge by the members of the Steering Committee, the cost-recovery model was used successfully. From the outset, many principles of good business practice were applied, such as developing a strategic plan that minimized risk through controlled growth, conducting a needs assessment to ensure there was a market for particular courses, and diversifying the programs offered. Revenue other than tuition was generated through local fundraising events and grant applications in order to offset the costs of the more expensive music classes, confirming that both program and revenue diversification are critical to sustainability. The cost-recovery model also allowed Centre 48 to retain its autonomy and to collaborate with partners that would complement rather than take over its operations.

Despite its success, Centre 48's social entrepreneurship was not recognized by the provincial government. Pitsula (2005) has suggested that it is time for the Government of Saskatchewan to recognize social entrepreneurship in the voluntary sector and to actively promote it with policy incentives like those accorded to the private sector to encourage business investment. Currently, however, the Saskatchewan government does not widely recognize investment in building social capital to stimulate economic development, although others have recognized the importance of this type of capital (Lyons, 2002; OECD, 2001a). The economic reality and uncertainty of the agricultural industry requires Saskatchewan communities to look at other ways of achieving economic stability. Improving quality of life through ventures such as Centre 48 may be a reasonable strategic alternative for rural renewal.

### *Leadership*

The members of the Steering Committee believed that they needed to take a stronger leadership role in promoting Centre 48. As a result of this discussion, an interesting gender difference emerged. The committee consisted entirely of women and had a notable lack of success in attracting men; in Montmartre, volunteering appeared to be along traditional gender lines, with men volunteering, for example, to build an ice-hockey rink. Additionally, many of the volunteers in the community were on several local committees and felt overloaded by the amount of volunteer work required. Essentially, volunteers were spread too thinly, a concern that emerged through the interview process. As one participant said, "It is hard because there are generally the same people on any board in town, and there are time constraints and stresses to deal with."

Sustaining the involvement of committed citizens is a common theme in community development literature, while building leadership capacity is central to community development. These issues are particularly critical, however, for revitalization efforts in rural communities where resident numbers are low and are further threatened by out-migration. Had the leadership challenge gone unaddressed, the entire Centre 48 project would have been jeopardized. The chairperson took on the majority of the committee's initial leadership responsibilities, although she realized that she would have to share responsibility and be inclusive of other committee members and their skills. As she noted in her interview, it was a struggle: "It is a role I struggle with—a fine line with over leading—or taking on the whole operation and management of the thing and being a cheerleader [or] being able to delegate—this is a big challenge."

### *The Importance of Educational Partnerships*

The role of partnerships, particularly with the University of Regina, the Southeast Regional College, and Montmartre School, was discussed more fully in the email conversations between the chairperson of the Steering Committee and the CCE director. Early on, community leaders took the strategic step of approaching both the University of Regina and the Southeast Regional College for help in establishing Centre 48. At the time of Montmartre's initial request for assistance, the Southeast Regional College's mandate limited its ability to offer and support personal development classes. More recently, in light of Montmartre's initiative, the college decided to develop a "community chest" that would provide a one-time grant to groups like Centre 48. The college's decision supports one of the key lessons learned in other regeneration studies: different types of partners are appropriate at different times in different types of community development projects (Osborne et al., 2002). Partnerships with rural schools are also seen as key to rural revitalization (Miller, 1995); Centre 48 holds its classes at Montmartre School, thus decreasing the threat of school closure.

The partnership with the University of Regina was unique, as it went beyond the traditional extension of service to rural communities by providing access to the university's resources. The CCE director acted in the role of consultant to the Steering Committee's chairperson in the development and implementation of Centre 48. Advice and mentorship were consistent. They discussed both macro issues, such as creating a strategic plan and operating on a cost-recovery basis, and micro issues, such as staffing, class scheduling, and contacts with various agencies. Consultation was based on the principles of community development, which recognized that members of Montmartre's community would identify their own needs, participate in all aspects of the decision making, and maintain local control over this

community-based program. The director saw her role as one of building capacity in Montmartre to fulfill its needs for continuing education programs. In her consultative role, the director, on behalf of the University of Regina, was able to provide a service to Montmartre by sharing the university's expertise and institutional resources, which included contacts, networks, and credibility. The credibility derived from partnering with the university was a source of confidence for the Centre 48 Steering Committee. As well, the centre's link with the university created a positive image for external groups. The role of a university in rural revitalization, therefore, need not be limited to offering classes or developing content-specific training to enhance community development (Korsching & Borich, 1996). University CE units can play a vital role in helping communities establish their own continuing education centre.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This article has looked at the role and impact of continuing education on rural regeneration. The results of this particular case study of Montmartre show this role has several aspects. Using a community development approach, university CE units can recapture some of their rural outreach role by sharing their expertise and resources to help small communities establish their own continuing education centres. At another level, the process of building and operating Centre 48 gave people in the community the confidence to explore new economic development projects with their Regional Economic Development Authority and to establish new small businesses. Participation in the courses led to class members forming interest groups, such as a running group and a writers' group, while other participants undertook special training to become Centre 48 instructors. Establishing Centre 48 also strengthened networks, as evidenced by Montmartre's closer links to the region's economic-development organizations, surrounding communities, granting agencies, its local district and school, the regional college, and the University of Regina.

With respect to educational implications, further research could be undertaken to explore the use of distance-education methods, such as the Internet, to provide community development consultation to small rural communities. The different types of learning that occurred as a result of being involved in social development could also be examined more closely. The usefulness of CE units employing a community development framework that emphasizes self-help and building community capacity in rural communities that lack access to continuing education programs similarly requires additional inquiry.

The importance of taking a social perspective to stimulate economic development is underscored by the Montmartre experience. Survival for many rural communities has meant taking on a number of social-development projects. This does not mean that governments or communities ought to abandon economic development in rural areas, but rather that they should recognize the path to economic development is not linear and that the building of social cohesion or social capital is another, complementary route to economic regeneration. Whether provincial governments will take advantage of this opportunity by supporting continuing education and community development remains to be seen. Nevertheless, research of this nature can provide input for policy development in the area of rural development and community sustainability.

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## BIOGRAPHY

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Marilyn Miller est professeur agrégé dans la Faculté d'Éducation à l'Université de Regina en Saskatchewan. Au moment où se déroulait le projet, elle était directrice du Centre de l'éducation permanente. Elle continue à participer aux affaires du Centre 48 et à célébrer son succès continu.