

PROMOTING SAFETY AWARENESS IN FISHING COMMUNITIES THROUGH COMMUNITY ARTS

Introduction

Government agencies and the fish harvesters' unions have pursued a range of strategies designed to reduce the number of accidents in the industry. These have ranged from regulations on the size and shape of vessels to a range of safety education programs. These programs have focused on improving individual fish harvesters' knowledge of basic safety regulations and the procedures to follow in case of an emergency. Together they have contributed to creating a safer industry.

However, there is a need to explore new ways of promoting a safety culture throughout fishing communities. Previous efforts have largely focused on the individual fish harvesters who are now required to undergo formal courses in safety. While these have been positive developments there is a need to explore the value of adopting a more collective approach. Such an approach requires engaging whole fishing communities in a program designed to raise safety awareness. This approach is rooted in the principles of community psychology and community development. It is designed to work with communities as a collective rather than with individual members of the community. Further, rather than trying to impose a particular framework on the community the challenge is to adopt a more interactive approach. This requires the use of innovative approaches.

There is increasing recognition of the potential role of community arts as a means of promoting community awareness and community change. By community arts is meant all forms of artistic/creative endeavour that are not only based in a community but draw upon the resources and heritage of a community. The traditional fabric of community culture is the medium through which development can best occur. It is guided by three assumptions: community culture has traditional legitimacy for participants in development programs; it contains symbols that express and identify various perceptions of reality; and it serves multiple functions such as entertainment, instruction and learning.

Project aims

The aim of this project was to explore the potential role of different community arts activities in promoting increased safety awareness in fishing communities.

Fishing community awareness project

The project was conducted in three fishing communities in Newfoundland: Bonavista, St. Brides/Cuslett and Petty Harbour/ Maddox Cove. It was designed on the principles of community action that encouraged community control and ownership of the program. As such, the actual details of the program were developed in collaboration with community residents rather than being imposed upon them. There were two restrictions:

1. the program focused on safety in the fishery,
2. the program made use of arts based activities.

Further, the program drew upon related research that had been previously conducted on safety in the industry. Beyond this it was decided that the actual character of the program was dependent upon the community participants. In each community the project evolved differently.

Bonavista

Community context

The town of Bonavista has a very rich history. It has for centuries been a centre of the fishing industry in the province. The advent of the moratorium in the early 90s had a significant impact on the area's economy, particularly of the smaller communities. Over the past five years there have been substantial developments in the crab fishing industry and efforts to develop a tourist industry.

Establishing the program.

An advisory committee was established with membership of three active fishermen and three employees from the fish processing plant. All of the committee members agreed that safety was an issue of major importance. Three local fishermen had recently drowned and one of the committee members was already taking steps to build a memorial monument to fishermen lost at sea. This committee provided ongoing guidance and advice. A local person was hired to coordinate meetings and to keep contact with interested individuals in the community. In addition, this person issued press releases.

The local high school was a major resource for the development of the project. The school principal was very sympathetic to the idea and identified three classroom teachers with whom we could work – the English, Drama and Graphic Arts teachers. After a group discussion these three agreed to develop a range of classroom based activities around safety in the fishing industry. After discussion with the project leaders the drama teacher offered to write a play especially for the project. The play, entitled "A Family Portrait", concerned a recent local tragedy when three fishermen had drowned. It considered the importance of safety and the need to take precautions when out a sea. This play did not make use of specific research material but rather the teacher's own recollection of that particular event coupled with her local knowledge of community life. The cast was recruited from school students and rehearsals were held. The English teacher introduced fishing and safety into her creative writing classes. A number of writing workshops were facilitated by a local writer. The students composed a large number of pieces of prose and poetry about the topic. The graphics teacher challenged his students to design a poster about safety in the fishing industry. They used a computer graphics package as their template. He himself designed a series of large graphic images for several road signs. It was planned that these would be displayed at the entrance to the community. At a later stage the music teacher became involved and the school choir rehearsed a number of songs concerned with the fishery. The staff of the fish processing plant organized a poster competition on health and safety at the local elementary school

A local musician also gave his support to the project. He agreed to compose a song about safety in the fishery. Following a discussion with the musician the project leader supplied him with copies of some of the interviews he had previously conducted with fish harvesters and the subsequent reports. It was agreed that the lyrics would stress the great satisfaction in being a fisherman and the need for caution because of the inherent dangers in the industry. The song was titled *Life on the water*. It was recorded in the musician's own studio.

Community program activities

After several months planning it was agreed to centre all activities round a Fishery Safety Week. This would open with an ecumenical church service, be followed by some safety demonstrations by the Fire Department and the local First Aid Committee, and conclude with a Community Concert. For various reason not all of the events proceeded according to plan.

The church service was held in the town's United Church. An organizing committee developed an order of service that included specially selected readings and hymns. The service was interdenominational and included clergy from the main religious groups in the town as well as members of different church choirs. At this church service the town mayor formally read a proclamation establishing Bonavista as a safe fishing community. A collection was taken up for the erection of a monument to people who had lost their lives off the coast of Bonavista. This was a successful event with almost 100 people in attendance. The attendance would probably have been larger if a second shift at the local fish plant not started on that day. The various churches were keen to participate. Over \$200 was raised for the memorial monument.

During the week it was also planned to have a number of public displays of safety related issues involving the local Fire Department and the Red Cross. The former went ahead attracted the interest of local youth. Although the members of the fire department were interested there had been limited promotion of this event and participation was lower than expected.

It was decided to showcase all of the school-based activities in a community concert along with the song composed by the local musician and other local music and songs. After months of planning the concert took place. It lasted over two hours and included songs, readings, a graphics display and a performance of the play. This was a very successful event. It attracted over 100 residents and over \$700 was raised for the memorial monument. Considerable effort had gone into planning this concert. The school made available all of their facilities including the sound and lighting system. The school choir and band had been involved in rehearsals. Actors had been recruited from the community and regular rehearsals held. The graphics teacher arranged a special slide show that included samples of the students' safety posters inter-cut with historic slides of the fishing industry that he had obtained from a local archive.

Impact of program

In general the key participants were very enthusiastic about the project. The members of the advisory committee expressed the view that this should not be a one-off event but that rather there should be ongoing events to raise safety awareness in the community. One expressed the view that there should be an annual safety week. In addition, they welcomed the funds raised for the memorial monument.

In the school the principal was similarly enthused. He mentioned that although the school was located in a fishing community there was very limited reference to their location in the school curriculum. The project had made him, his staff and students aware of their fishing heritage. He also was keen to extend the project into other parts of the school curriculum. There was also talk about a similar concert-type event in

subsequent years and of building links with the fishing industry through, for example, inviting fish harvesters into the school to speak with the students.

This project received wide publicity through the local newspaper, in classrooms, through the church service and other public activities. The community arts workers were keen to continue to expand their involvement into other areas of community work. Discussions are on-going about the potential extension of the work into other fishing communities.

The project leaders made regular visit to this community. Their input was important especially in the early stages of the project. However, the final planning for the concert was largely in the hands of the local residents.

Challenges in developing the program

While the program in this community was very successful, there were many challenges. It is important to reflect upon these and how they can best be addressed in other locations. A public sector strike and a local fishing disaster forced the cancellation of the concert on two occasions. These cancellations led to a certain amount of disorganization in the project. Fortunately the local coordinator was very enthusiastic and it was possible to reschedule the event. In addition, the church service clashed with the work schedule at the local fish plant and possibly contributed to the lower than expected participation. The project in this community relied upon limited resources and substantial volunteer time, especially by the concert organizers. A strong advisory committee consisting of fish harvesters and fish plant workers was established in this community. Members of this committee were important especially in the early stages of the project. However, in view of the many delays they became less involved in the later stages of the project.

St. Brides

Community context

St. Brides is a small fishing community about 160km from St. John's. It has several smaller linked communities including Patrick's Cove, Angel's Cove, Cuslett, Point Lance and Branch with a total population of about 1500. Together they make up what is known as the Cape Shore. Historically the major industries in this district have been farming and fishing. The district has been very badly affected by the fishing moratorium. The current population of St. Brides is 475 residents, a drop of 19.7% since 1991. However, more recently there has been a certain rebound in the fishing industry with the turn to crab. Currently about 40 fishing boats use the harbour at St. Brides and there is a small fish processing plant.

Establishing the community program.

This community's program was centered round a local theatre group that for the past five years has offered a short summer season of plays based upon local stories. This group has been very successful in building community awareness and attracts both local people and city residents to performances. The group's administrator also acted as the coordinator for the project while the artistic director took responsibility for arranging the play. This theatre group is based in the small community of Cuslett about two kilometers

from St. Brides. The group operates out of Cuslett Community Center. The actors in the group are drawn from the local community.

A committee was established that included the theatre director and administrator, some local fish harvesters, schoolteachers and a representative of the harbour authority. This committee discussed possible activities and agreed to involve the school.

Fatima Academy is an all grade school located in the community of St. Bride's. For the 2004/2005 academic year the school had a student population of 160 and a teaching, administration, and support staff of 18. The school serves the educational needs of students resident in communities on the Cape Shore. Two teachers agreed to initiate a number of fishing safety related activities in the school.

Community program activities.

There was considerable discussion as regards the type of activities to organize in the community. Following the example of Bonavista it was decided to centre the safety activities round a dedicated Fishing Safety Week. The focal point for this would be a series of cultural activities in the community centre in Cuslett.

It was decided to perform an established play rather than attempt to write a locally based play. The play selected was *Riders to the Sea*. This play was written in 1902 by the Irish playwright John Millington Synge. Like all of his plays, it was controversial when originally performed because of the supposed negative portrayal of Irish life. The play deals with the drowning of fishermen off the Aran Islands in the west of Ireland. It was felt that because of the strong Irish heritage in the community that this play would be particularly fitting. In this production, the central character was played by a fisherwoman and all members of the cast were local residents. The play was accompanied by traditional music and song. On the walls of the centre were displayed some drawings on the issue of safety at sea that were made by local school children. About 60 residents attended the concert/play when it was performed in the small community centre. A report of the event was published in the local newspaper. This event was very successful. It illustrated the value of using established drama as a means of raising safety awareness.

As a means of broadening discussion of safety in the community it was agreed with Coast Guard that one of their vessels would come into the harbour and invite local residents on board for a tour. Unfortunately, because of the weather this was cancelled. This was a good idea but it was difficult to plan for the weather. The availability of other safety-related material that could be used in a display should be considered.

Two teachers engaged their students in related activities. These included drawings of safety at sea issues that were displayed at the concert. They also initiate a survey of safety issues. The two teachers initiated some good ideas. However, they had limited support and resources.

Impact of program

Interviews were conducted with key personnel involved in this project. Once again they expressed a very enthusiastic perspective. The artistic director thought that although the play was formally set in another country the audience quickly identified with the characters and felt that its message was relevant to their community. She and the local coordinator were keen to initiate other related projects.

One of the schoolteachers mentioned that she was not herself from a fishing community and at the outset had felt very ignorant about the fishing industry. Now that she had participated in the project she felt very knowledgeable about the industry. There was a certain amount of public activity around the play/concert. This included a newspaper report. In some ways this project ran quite independently. It fitted in with the ongoing program of the community theatre. This was a plus since the local administrator was experienced in this sort of work.

Challenges in developing the program

The program in this community was successful. However, there were some challenges that should be considered. It had been planned to have a coast guard vessel call to the community during the week of activities. However, in view of the weather this had to be postponed. This project relied heavily upon the resources of the local theatre company. This considerably eased the introduction of the project. It illustrates the benefit of identifying comparable community arts groups with whom to develop such projects. An advisory committee met at the outset of the project. This was important in giving the project local legitimacy and support. However, its members had limited involvement as the project developed.

Petty Harbour / Maddox Cove

Community context

Petty Harbour / Maddox Cove is a fishing community about 15km outside St. John's. It has a population of 960 in 2001, a drop of 12.8% since 1991. Although it is near the larger metropolitan centre of St. John's, this community has managed to maintain its distinct identity and community spirit.

Establishing the program

This committee took time to establish. It was composed of the town mayor, some local fish harvesters and a fish processing worker. Although it took time it get established when the program was finally sorted out all committee members worked hard to ensure that it was a success. A person was appointed to coordinate the meetings of the local advisory committee and to make the necessary local arrangements. Unfortunately, due to a variety of factors the initial plans were cancelled and the local coordinator left town. Another person took on his job.

Unfortunately there is not a school in this community. The young people attend a school about 8km away and there is limited connection between that school and the local community. Fortunately, the town council has an active youth committee. This committee expressed a strong interest in participating in the planned activities.

It was originally planned to have a play performed in the community. There was discussion regarding what play and initial plans were developed. However, due to shortage of time and resources it was decided to develop a video about safety that could be used as a focus for discussion. In this video six fish harvesters and the tow mayor described their views on safety and the impact of a disaster on a family and community.

Community program activities

A breakfast discussion meeting was held in the community centre. This was advertised throughout the community and was organized by community volunteers, in particular the youth committee and the women's volunteers. This was a successful event. A total of 75 people turned about and included a wide spectrum of community residents. The mayor welcomed people to the event after breakfast was served. The video was then shown. This was followed by a discussion on safety in the fishing industry.

A dinner and dance was organized in the community centre. Again the community youth committee and women's auxiliary played a very active role in preparing the event. A total of 135 people participated. After some introductions by the mayor and a committee member, the song A Life on the Sea was played followed by the video.

The four local church ministers agreed to jointly organize a blessing of the fishing fleet. This was held on the wharf. About 100 people attended this event. A special service was organized that included readings, songs and the blessing of the boats.

Impact of program

Interviews were conducted with key personnel involved in this project. They were very enthusiastic about the project. The committee members indicated that they intended to reconvene next year and attempt to organize a similar series of events. Members of the youth group were enthusiastic about the project. They expressed some disappointment that they had not had the opportunity of mounting the play. However, they had learned a lot through their participation and indicated that they might be able to mount the play at a later stage. A total of 300 people attended the different events. This is almost one third of the population of the community. This would indicate that the message of safety reached a large proportion of the population.

Challenges in developing the program

After many delays the program in this community was eventually successful. Certain factors contributed to these delays. Certain events had been planned by the local coordinator but liaison with him was not maintained and then he left the community. A new coordinator was recruited and a new plan of action developed. An important resource in the other two communities was the school. However, this community did not have a school. Fortunately there was an active youth committee who were keen to support the project. After the initial delays a strong advisory committee consisting of fish harvesters and elected officials was established in this community. Members of this committee were important throughout the project and each was keen to participate.

Developing community safety awareness through the arts

Impact of the program

Informal discussion with the key project participants confirmed their enthusiasm not only to participate in the project but to initiate similar activities in subsequent years. It is important to note that this impact was particularly noticeable among those community residents who were not themselves fish harvesters. The reason for this effect may be that their participation in the project made them aware of their potential role in increasing safety in the fishing industry. Rather than being just being bystanders who

could comment on the hazardousness of the industry they could now play a role in creating a safer industry. This applied to school teachers, town officials and plant workers. Admittedly this assessment was based on informal discussion.

- There is a need for a more formal evaluation of the impact of community safety awareness projects on fish harvesters and other community residents. It is important that these evaluations are developed in collaboration with the communities and form part of future projects.

In addition, community arts workers became aware of their role in promoting awareness of safety in the fishing community. While they had taken up a variety of issues in their previous work, they had not focused on safety as an issue.

- Community arts workers should be encouraged to consider safety in the fishing industry as a focus for their work.
- Community arts workers should discuss collaborative projects with fishing and other community organizations.

The high participation by residents in the various activities organized in the three communities confirms both their interest in safety issues and arts-based activities. The project also attracted wider media interest.

- Government agencies should be advised of the widespread interest in community arts activities as a means of promoting community safety awareness.
- Future projects should take account of the processes and challenges identified in this project.

Processes

We were concerned with identifying the processes involved in implementing the program. An identification of these factors would contribute to the development of recommendations for future work on building community safety awareness through the arts. Several factors ensured the success of this project: These include:

- **Conceptual framework:** From the outset the project leaders adopted a community development approach of working from the ground up. They emphasized throughout the project that their role should be seen as catalysts and facilitators rather than organizers. This approach insured community ownership of the project and hopefully increased the prospect of sustainability. Future projects should work with the community rather than trying to impose an established project from outside.
- **Local capacity:** The project leaders went to considerable effort to identify local capacity in terms of individuals with particular skills and resources. These included people from the fishing industry, the arts community, the school/youth community, and the churches. These individuals are essential for any comparable project. In our case they collectively had the expertise, interest in the subject matter and enthusiasm to complete the project. Admittedly, the several delays interrupted the project momentum and we were fortunate that several additional individuals were identified who were prepared to take on responsibilities later in the project. Future projects should spend time in identifying local capacity and of providing basic training to those who indicate that they are keen to participate.
- **Expertise:** The project leaders could be considered the experts on certain aspects of the project. However, their expertise would have limited impact without

connecting to the local expertise. It is through this symbiosis that the project was able to attain success. Project leaders must work with community leaders to maximize the success of future projects.

- **Planning:** The committee in each town established a planning/advisory committee and developed a clear plan of activities. Although there were many challenges to this plan it provided a framework that kept the project moving. It is important to have a planning committee and to develop a plan of action at the early stages of the project and to work towards its implementation.
- **Individual and shared responsibility:** For the project to succeed people had to take on responsibility for particular aspects of the project. While the project leaders had an oversight of these responsibilities each team member of the team had to accept his or her responsibility. Team members must be aware of their individual responsibility for particular aspects of the project. A well-organized committee can review these responsibilities and ensure that tasks are being completed.
- **Morale and support:** It was important to maintain the morale of community participants. This required regular contact with the project coordinators. Unfortunately, for various reasons, there were many delays in implementing the project in the communities. This led to a certain frustration among community participants. It is important to maintain community morale among community participants by ensuring successful completion of at least parts of the project.

Resources

- **School:** Having a school in the community was a major resource. This was the case in Bonavista and St. Brides. In Petty Harbour the school had recently closed and the young people were bussed to a school about 10 km away. This meant the loss of the teachers, students, meeting rooms and other physical resources. It is important to make contact with the local school or youth committee at an early stage to ensure their involvement in the project.
- **Community centre:** It is vitally important to have a meeting place for organizing and performing certain events. In Bonavista, advisory committee meetings were held in the harbour authority. In Cuslett, we met in the community centre while in Petty Harbour we met in the Town Hall. It is important to identify suitable venues for meetings and performances. These can range from town halls, school halls to union halls.
- **Media:** The local media were very supportive of this project and printed press releases when these were provided. Other media outlets, such as television and radio were not accessed. All media outlets should be approached to carry details of events.
- **Arts community:** Members of the arts community played a central role in this project. These included playwrights, musicians and actors. It is important to recognize that many local community members have a range of talents. The challenge is to involve them in the project activities. It is important to involve as wide a variety of local artists in the project.
- **Church:** The church has traditionally played a central role in many fishing communities. However, they have not been actively involved in safety-related

activities. In this project, it was found that religious personnel were keen to play a role. Churches and religious personnel are an important resource in developing comparable projects.

- **Union:** The fish harvesters union provided strong support for this project. It is important to work with the local union branch.
- **Council:** The town councils in the communities were very supportive and provided a range of resources. Town councils should be approached to enlist their support.

Challenges to program implementation

It is also important to review the various challenges to the implementation to the project that were encountered in each of the communities.

- **Local circumstances:** In each of the communities a problem emerged that was not anticipated. These included bad weather, opening of the local fish plant, opening of the crab season, and a local tragedy. While not all challenges can be foreseen it is important that future projects deliberately plan their project to take account of such events.
- **Resources:** The resources available for the project were limited. Despite this considerable initiative was used by local communities to identify resources. The project did not make use resources that may be available from government agencies. The planning committee should review all of the potential resources available and attempt to access these. Future projects should deliberately access and integrate safety material from other agencies.
- **Involvement of fish harvesters:** Each community involved a number of fish harvesters in the planning and implementation of the project. It is important that future project ensure active involvement of fish harvesters.
- **Facilitation guide:** As an aid to the implementation of comparable projects in other communities a facilitator's guide has been developed.

Community arts and community health action

In mixing the community arts with community health action such as that designed to promote community awareness of safety there is often the prospect of conflict. On the one hand community health has the direct aim of improving the health of the community. On the other hand the arts are concerned with entertainment and enlightenment. Fish harvesters undertake formal safety training and are required to purchase expensive safety equipment. The aim of community arts activities is not to provide more knowledge but rather to raise community awareness. This project has demonstrated the success of this strategy. It has shown how it is possible to raise community awareness of safety in the fishing industry through the development of a series of community arts projects.

Principal Investigator

Michael Murray PhD
Memorial University of Newfoundland
2005