# Moving Beyond Tokenism
## Strengthening Community on Community Boards of Directors

Parkdale Project Read

# Introduction

This is the report of a project at Parkdale Project Read (PPR) funded by the Metcalf Foundation from January, 2009 until March, 2010. This project addressed a long-standing concern at Parkdale Project Read about equity on its Board of Directors. Like many community organizations in Toronto, PPR encourages participants in the program, in this case, volunteer literacy tutors and adult literacy learners, to serve on its Board of Directors. But, as become evident in many community organizations, simply including participants on a board does not guarantee that they will be fully included in board discussion and decision-making. Differences of class, race and culture will often divide such a board into an in-group and an out-group. The in-group, middle-class, usually white and Canadian-born individuals, bring experience, education and a sense of entitlement which less privileged board members cannot bring. This experience, education and sense of entitlement is supported within traditional board procedures, which assume board members who know the rules, have mastered certain kinds of document literacy and are used to making themselves heard at meetings. What results, all too frequently, is the replication of social divisions on the boards of directors of organizations committed to working against exactly these kinds of social divisions. This result is more than ironic; it is a tragic undermining of the purpose of these organizations, a retreat into social norms that weakens an organization's momentum. It has serious practical consequences, depriving the organization of the knowledge and experience that program participants could bring to its governing body.

In 2008, following an Annual General Meeting at which a particularly dynamic group of program participants was elected to the PPR Board of directors, as well as other board members committed to equity on the PPR board and experienced in facilitating organizational change, PPR staff proposed a process to address its longstanding concern. Staff time would be allocated, to the extent possible, to supporting an *ad hoc* committee of the Board to reform how the Board conducts business. It applied to Metcalf Foundation for help in providing this staff time. PPR does not receive funding for staff time to support its board, or even attend board meetings, so the support of the Metcalf Foundation made the crucial difference between a very ad hoc process and a process that could be constantly supported by staff. The Foundation's support modified its usual practice of supporting community initiatives that address poverty direction more directly. We understand that it supported our work in the hope that our experience would be useful to other community organizations that believe in its participants as a community resource for poverty reduction and not just the recipients of services. We feel that the leadership shown by program participants on our board, both at our board and in the community supports the Foundation's decision to fund this initiative. In this report, we have done our

best to gather what we have learned into a document that can be used by other community organizations as a practical tool for restructuring boards of directors to promote equity and alliances for social change across divisions of class, race and culture. Although this document does not presume to tell others how to bring about this kind of restructuring, we have gathered materials and information from our project which we hope will provide a useful starting point. This includes a background paper on the changes we made at our Board meetings during the project, materials from a Board orientation workshop and a symposium about our project for other community organizations, and commentary by me, a part-time staff person at Parkdale Project Read and facilitator for the project, including notes about the results, effectiveness, and lessons learned at each step along the way.

*Guy Ewing*

# 1.  Background:  The Creation of the Learners' Committee of the Board

Discussion about equity on the Board began at a meeting of the staff collective. In the spring of 2008, staff proposed the creation of a Learners' Committee of the Board, and this proposal was accepted. One of the reasons for the creation of this committee was to ensure that, at every meeting, there would be an item on the agenda, the Learners' Committee Report, for learners to raise issues. Staff were concerned that, all too often, learners attended meetings without actively raising issues and felt that a time on the agenda would make this easier. The Learners' Committee would include all of the learners on the Board and any learners who wanted to meet with them. The Board readily accepted this proposal.

*Results/Effectiveness*

*The designation of the Learners' Committee created space at Board meetings for learners to speak, but the power dynamics at Board meetings did not change dramatically. Learners usually used this space to speak about personal accomplishments and concerns. The Learners' Committee met informally immediately before Board meetings. At these meetings, they were not joined by other learners.*

*Creating space on the agenda for learners was a positive step. The social dynamics of Board meetings shifted, as other Board members listened to and responded to learners talking about their accomplishments and concerns. The Board became more cohesive as a social group. At the same time, the gap between what learners felt they could discuss and what other Board members felt that they could discuss became apparent. The creation of a Learners' Committee created a structure for learners to work together for organizational change, but is underused. Continued support for the Learner's Committee by staff, through encouragement and information, is essential. One effective strategy has been asking learners on the Board to use the Learners' Committee Report to report on community meetings, to which all members of the program are invited, but which are mainly attended by learners. At these meetings, community issues are discussed, for example, the need for more programming for the children of learners.*

## 2. The Creation of the Board Access Committee

In the fall of 2008 staff proposed the creation of a Board Access Committee, and this proposal was accepted. The committee consisted of two learners on the Board, the Chair, an experienced Board member who had previously been Treasurer of the Board, and a staff support person, myself. The committee would meet to discuss procedural changes to make Board meetings work better for learners. The Board would experiment with procedural changes proposed by the committee. Staff would apply to the Metcalf Foundation for funding to pay for the time of the staff support person, for the design of a workshop for future Boards, and for a workshop for other community organizations in Parkdale on what Parkdale Project Read had learned from this process.

*Results/Effectiveness*

*The Committee began to meet. As staff support person for the Committee, I participated as a volunteer. At times, this limited my ability to plan and coordinate the work of the committee, due to other program demands and the demands of other part-time work.*

*Community organizations benefit from the energy and volunteer work of their members, including staff. But, ultimately, important work within an organization requires the work of paid staff to be effective. It is important for community organizations to plan for the time demands of equitable governance. This includes securing and allocating funding for staff time to support the challenging process of learning how to share power within a community organization.*

# 3.  Changing Board Procedures, and Changing the Social Dynamics of the Board

In January, 2009, Parkdale Project Read received funding from the Metcalf Foundation to support Board reform. This provided time and energy for the process. The Board Access Committee met regularly, with the support of staff planning and coordination. At each Board meeting, new procedures were tried. Following each meeting, the committee reviewed the new procedures, eliminating some procedures, modifying others and developing new procedures to propose. The participation of the Board Chair on the committee guaranteed that the proposed changes would be integrated into how the meetings were conducted.

Typically, specific ideas for change were initiated by the two experienced Board members and/or the staff support person. The learners on the committee usually waited to see how these changes would play out at Board meetings and then provide feedback and suggestions for change.

At its final meeting before the Annual General meeting in June, procedural changes were formally proposed by the committee and accepted by the Board. As staff support person, I wrote a background paper describing and explaining these procedural changes. As I wrote, I realized that, along with these procedural changes, the social dynamics of the Board had evolved. Underlying any kind of social action are values, attitudes and the politics of personal interaction. These values, attitudes and politics lead to action, but they also evolve as action is taken, and, in turn, shape further action. So what is described in the background paper, below, is not just procedural change but also social change, in one small social group, the Board of Directors of Parkdale Project Read, associated with the values and attitudes articulated in the paper. We believe that, ultimately, this kind of social change is possible in all social contexts.

*Finding Common Ground:  A Background Paper about Working on Diverse Community Boards of Directors*

*Parkdale Project Read, 2009*

**Working together on a community board of directors**

Working together on a board of directors means finding common ground.  On a community board of directors, this can be hard work.  People on a community board share their commitment to a community organization, but they usually bring different kinds of knowledge and experience to this commitment.  Some have professional knowledge; they may be lawyers, teachers or business people.  Others bring knowledge of what it's like to live in poverty, deal with violence, learn to read and write as an adult.  Some have experience with traditional board procedure.  Some have experience negotiating solutions in community learning groups.  All of this knowledge and experience is useful to the work of a board of directors; all of it deserves respect and a place at the table.  But it takes work to find common ground, a framework for discussing and deciding issues that will allow everyone to speak, to be heard, and to fully participate in the decision-making process.

One important part of finding common ground is establishing language practices that work for everyone on a board.  If some board members have difficulty using written language, it is not workable for crucial information to be presented only in written language.  If some board members are unfamiliar with the spoken language of traditional board procedure, it is not workable to use this language at board meetings.

Sometimes, board members who have experience on more traditional, less diverse boards of directors worry that if traditional board language, written and spoken, is not used board work will become "dumbed down."  This view underestimates the creativity of language.  It is human nature to value how we do things, what has worked for us in the past, but linguists have shown us that there is no one "smart" way of doing things with language, only ways that are suited to particular groups of people.  The language practices that a diverse board of directors negotiate will be smart.  It will reflect their diverse circumstances, knowledge and experience.

Another important part of finding common ground is establishing an environment which encourages

everyone to speak and listen.  Establishing common language practices will help, but they are not always enough.  People who are not used to speaking at meetings need procedures which help everyone to speak and to listen.

Finally, it is important for people to acknowledge that community boards are a special kind of space, where our daily lives, framed by the norms of our own social class, are suspended, and where we learn to interact differently.  There is a way in which a diverse board of directors, working together as a group, anticipates a new kind of society, one in which people work together across class differences.  As Jerry Lee Miller, a former board member at Parkdale Project Read and longtime literacy activist, has pointed out, to engage with a community board of directors is to engage in more than routine program oversight.  It is to engage in an ongoing learning process in which the underlying vision of social justice organizations is at stake.

**Some ways of finding common ground:  Parkdale Project Read's experience**

During the 2008 – 2009 fiscal year, the Board of Directors of Parkdale Project Read undertook to broaden its common ground.  This project began after the election of a new Board of Directors which included four adult literacy learners in the program. Learners had served on the PPR Board since the 1980s, but had always been a tiny minority on the Board.  Now, one third of Board members were learners, and this created energy for change.

The project was undertaken with the help and encouragement of the Metcalf Foundation, which provided funding for staff time to support this process.  The staff person worked with a committee of the Board, the Board Access Committee, made up of four Board members, including two literacy learners.   This Committee generated ideas for new procedures, which were then tried at Board meetings.  The new procedures were evaluated by the Committee and by the Board.  At the end of the year, the Committee made recommendations to the Board, and these recommendations were adopted.

What follows is a description of these proposals, with explanation, followed by a point form summary of the proposals.  These are changes to Board procedure which we believe will be useful at PPR Board meetings.  We have also included a table of general statements about what works and doesn't work on community boards of directors.  Organizations are different, so some of the procedures which the PPR

Board has adopted may not work in another organization. But we think that our general statements will be useful to any Board of Directors that wants to challenge itself to find ways of being more accessible. Currently, we are designing a workshop for the newly elected PPR Board of Directors based on these general statements, as well as on the specific recommendations of the Board Access Committee. With the support of the Metcalf Foundation, we will present a modified version of this workshop to three partner organizations in Parkdale – Parkdale Activity Recreation Centre (PARC), Parkdale Community Health Centre and Parkdale Community Legal Services – and to other interested organizations.

**Common language**

Much of work of the Board Access Committee had to do with language. A crucial part of this work had to do with minutes. Initially, the Committee experimented with doing away with written minutes and beginning each meeting with an oral summary of the previous meeting. Ultimately, it was concluded that it was valuable to have a written record of meetings, but that this record should be jargon-free, and should include only the following information:

- who was there
- what was decided
- action items
- issues that were not resolved, or that were temporarily resolved, with concerns expressed

It was decided that these minutes would be short enough to be read out loud at the beginning of the following meeting, with follow-up discussion at which questions could be raised and revisions made, subject to Board consensus. The minutes, and revised minutes, would be made available to all Board members. One learner on the Board, in particular, expressed an interest in reading them. But, because the minutes are read out loud, all Board members now have the same information about what has been decided at meetings, whether or not they are able to read the minutes. In other words, the minutes provide common ground.

It was decided that relevant documents, such as budgets and Board correspondence, would be kept in a binder in the program office. All Board members would have access to this binder. If a Board member had difficulty reading or understanding a document, s/he would contact the Secretary to arrange for
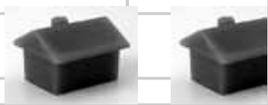
help by staff or a volunteer tutor.

The presentation and discussion of budgets was identified as a crucial area for the creation of common language.  A format was developed for presenting budgets to the Board.  A revenue-and-expenditures format was used, rather than balance sheets.  All of the information was presented in three formats:  pie charts, numbers and pictographs.

# Project Read Core Budget

TTC & Child Care 14%

Staff 66%

Materials 5%

Rent 8%
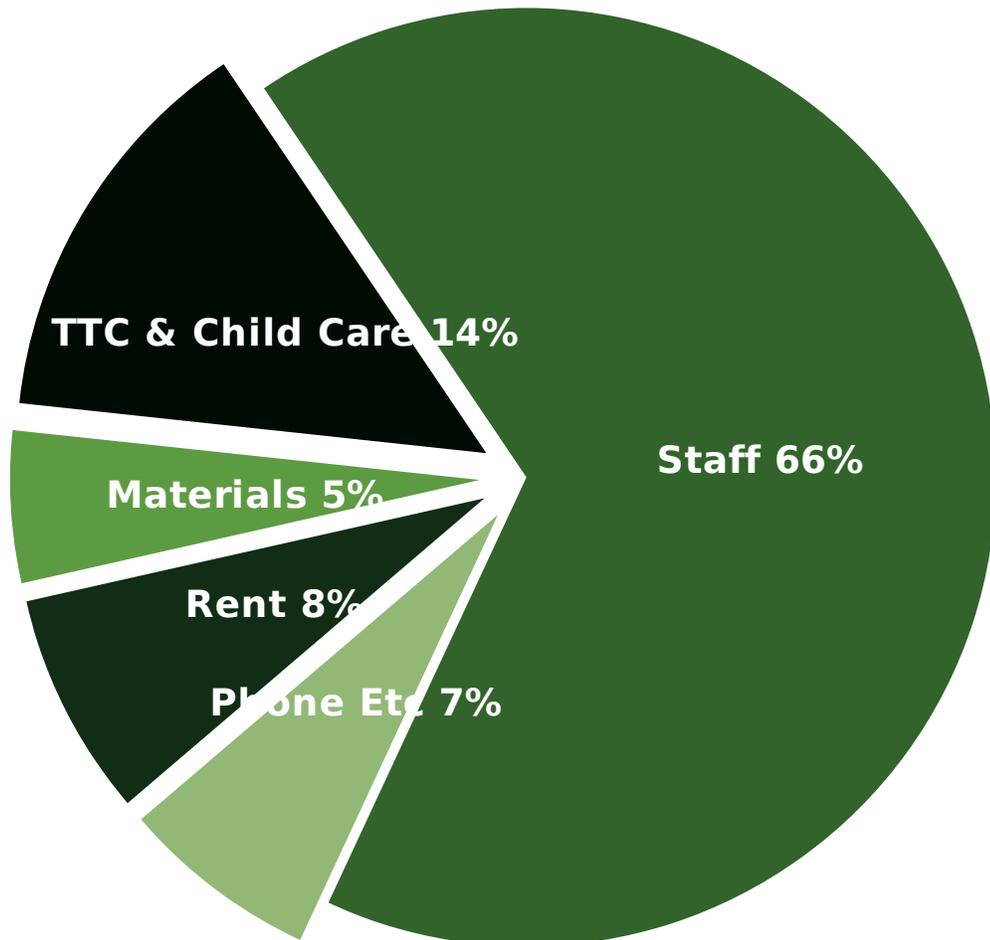
Phone Etc 7%

| | |
|---|---|
| **Staff** | 146,050 |
| **Phone Etc** | 15000 |
| **Rent** | 17000 |
| **Materials** | 11500 |
| **TTC & Child Care** | 30500 |
| **Fixed** | 4618 |

**Staff**
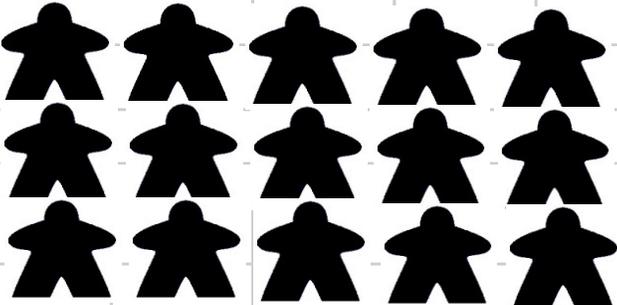
**Phone**

**Rent**

**Materials**

**TTC & Child Care**

Each icon stands for roughly $10,000. Fractional icons represent about $5,000.

It was decided that the oral presentation of budgets would focus on areas where choices could be made, rather than on fixed costs and revenue.  This would shift the discussion from the sometimes abstruse world of balance sheets to the important area of program priorities, where everyone's knowledge and experience can be brought to bear.

These changes did not put an end to Board members' questions about minutes or budgets.  But they have created common linguistic ground in which questions can be asked and addressed in an environment of mutual understanding.  They make it less likely that Board members will throw in the towel, simply deferring to those perceived to have a better understanding of this kind of work.

In addition to making these procedural changes, Parkdale Project Read is committed to an understanding that underlies them:  that the primary mode of communication on a diverse board of directors must be face-to-face spoken language, and that this language must be truly relational and communicative.  So we must avoid communicating important information in written language, and beyond that, when we speak at meetings we must be constantly alert to the possibility of slipping into spoken language which borrows vocabulary and phraseology from worlds in which the written word is the primary mode of communication.  Community board meetings are, as has been said, a special place, requiring mental and social energy, presence, commitment.  When we slip into language habits that are not suited to this environment, we run the risk of speaking at each other rather than to each other.  By committing ourselves to the primacy of face-to-face spoken language that is relational and communicative we commit ourselves to communication that  continuously seeks common ground.

**Encouraging everyone to speak and listen**

Finding common language goes a long way in encouraging everyone to speak and listen at Board meetings, but the Board Access Committee recommended other measures as well.  Sometimes, procedures at meetings make it hard to know when to speak.  Not wanting to speak at inappropriate times, board members sometimes keep quiet, and miss opportunities to make their opinions known.

The committee made two recommendations to address this problem.  First, a fixed agenda was established for each meeting, a series of committee reports followed by Other Business.  The committee reports provide space for raising issues in particular areas of ongoing concern to the Board:

fundraising, finance, personnel, anti-discrimination, programming, learners' concerns.  The Other Business item provides space for raising other issues.  At the beginning of a meeting, the Chair highlights issues of pressing importance, such as a budget that needs to be approved.  But there is no jockeying for putting items on the agenda.  This keeps the Other Business item open, without items being put up on a flip chart which some Board members cannot read.  For people who have difficulty using written language, procedure can become mysterious and feel exclusionary as soon as it is put into writing.  Keeping the Other Business item open, with no written agenda, avoids this problem.

The Learners' Committee report provides a space on the agenda for learners to raise issues of particular concern to learners.  The Learners' Committee of the Board is made up of learners on the Board and any other learners in the program who want to join.  Learners' issues may be identified by committee members or at community meetings, where everyone in the program is invited to discuss community issues.  In the coming year, PPR plans to hold frequent general meetings.  It is our hope that these meetings will provide information and support to the Learners' Committee of the Board.

In addition to the fixed agenda, the Board Access Committee introduced the use of speaking toggles at board meetings.  The toggles are dowels that are painted red on one round end, green on the other.  If someone wants to speak but has not been recognized by the Chair, s/he places his/her toggle on the table with the red end up.  It is the Chair's responsibility to ensure that this person has a chance to speak.

At the PPR Board, decisions are made by consensus. There is always a danger that the Chair will assume consensus when someone still wants to speak or ask a question;  a toggle with its red end up will prevent this from happening.  The green end of the toggle allows Board members to signal the Chair that they are comfortable with a proposal. The use of the speaking toggles shifts the interpersonal dynamics of speaking and listening at Board meetings.  Speaking



and listening become a collective responsibility of the Board, enacted with the facilitation of the Chair, rather than the responsibility of individual Board members, trying to navigate their way into a discussion, using whatever procedural expertise they have.  The Chair, as facilitator, will create spaces

for board members to speak and listen, and Board members with procedural savvy will ensure that s/he is doing this.

**Making it comfortable**

The physical environment of the place where a board meets can be important. For example, one member of the Board Access Committee, who uses a wheelchair, explained that the table used at PPR Board meetings was uncomfortably low for her, and that this made her feel awkward at the meetings. A higher table was used at subsequent meetings, and the Board Access Committee recommended that staff check with Board members to ensure that their meeting space is comfortable.

**Making it real**

An additional change completes the picture of a year of Board reform at PPR. The procedure of seconding has been eliminated. On a Board which maintains a formal atmosphere, which is adversarial and where decisions are determined by vote rather than by consensus, seconding is a way of ensuring that at least two individuals support the idea of discussing a proposed course of action. On a Board that maintains an informal atmosphere, where members take collective responsibility for speaking and listening, and where decisions are made by consensus, seconding becomes an empty gesture. Worse, it can create a charade of participation, with members who remain silent during discussion jumping in to second motions so that they, and others, feel that they are taking part. The PPR Board has removed this formal appendage from its meetings, and does not miss it at all. If someone has a proposal to make, it is discussed.

**A summary of the changes at PPR Board meetings**

➜ Jargon-free minutes that include only the following information:

- who was there
- what was decided
- action items
- issues that were not resolved or that were temporarily resolved, with concerns expressed

➜ The minutes are read out loud in their entirety, followed by questions, discussion, and correction if necessary.

➜ Background documents are kept on display in the program office.

➜ If a Board member requests information that is only available through a document and has difficulty reading that document, the Secretary of the Board will arrange for reading help by staff or a volunteer tutor.

➜ Budgets presented in a Revenue and Expenditures format, with all information presented in three formats: numbers, pie charts and pictographs.

➜ Budget discussions identify and focus on choices available to the organization.

➜ A fixed format agenda, organized by topic.

➜ Apart from the identification of time-sensitive items by the chair, no specification in advance of particular items on the agenda. No agenda planning on flip charts.

➜ Places in the agenda where any issue can be raised.

➜ Speaking toggles to signal the desire to speak.

➜ Staff ensure that the physical space is as comfortable as possible.

➜ The elimination of seconding.

**What works and doesn't work on a diverse community board, based on Parkdale Project Read's experience**

| Works | Doesn't work |
|---|---|
| Speaking face-to-face. | Focussing on written information. |
| Valuing spoken language | Giving more value to what is written down. |
| Being alert to how well you are being understood and using your native ability to adjust your speech to fit the situation. | Droning on in language that some Board members do not understand, or having a semi-private conversation with Board members who use the same vocabulary and phraseology. |
| Speaking as an equal. | Speaking down to people or speaking up to people. |
| Creating vital Board documents, such as minutes, that are readable, even by people who are learning to read, which focus on what is important, and which can be readily understood when read out loud. | Creating vital Board documents which are hard to read and too long and complicated to be read out loud. |
| Making background information available to all, through oral communication or through help with reading background documents, as requested. | Keeping background information locked in documents. |
| Presenting financial information in the context of organizational choices, in a clear format. | Presenting financial information the way an accountant would. |
| Letting your hair down. Listening. | Maintaining a formal atmosphere in which people feel awkward speaking. |
| Leaving spaces where people can jump in and speak. | Filling an agenda with items at the beginning of a meeting. |
| Challenging everyone to listen and remember. | Writing things down on flip charts. |
| Making it easy for people to signal when they have something to say. | Making it hard for people to signal when they have something to say. |
| Taking collective responsibility for speaking and listening. | Thinking of the Board as a collection of individuals who must compete for their ideas to be heard. |
| A meeting space where everyone feels comfortable. | A meeting space where some board members feel awkward, out of place, uncomfortable. |
| Eliminating unnecessarily complicated and obscure procedures. | Holding onto tradition, whether it makes sense or not. |

# Parkdale Project Read
# Board Meeting – XXXX, 2009

Board Members:

Staff:

## 1. Welcome

## 2. Minutes    Read and approved without changes.

## 3. Fundraising Committee    X and X are organizing the annual Cabaret fundraising
event on March 30.  They need help with drinks, food and raffle prizes.

## 4. Programming Committee    Hasn't met.

## 5. Finance Committee    Our rent will not go up for another year, but we should start
talking with the landlord about this.

It looks as though PPR's budget will balance at the end of the fiscal year, which is the
end of March.

X presented a version of the budget for this year with pie charts and pictographs.  Y said
that the pictographs were particularly useful, but that the numbers were too small for a
visually impaired person like herself to read easily.

## 6. Learners' Committee    X has already been paid to do work on the PPR website,

but wants input from learners before he goes ahead.  Perhaps we could ask the Learners' Committee to have a meeting with X to talk about the website.  It would be good to schedule this meeting on a weeknight, so that learners who have not been involved in the Learners' Committee could come.

**7.  Board Access Committee**    The Committee's main idea for this meeting was X's budget presentation.  Y will write a progress report for discussion at the Access Committee.

**8.  Personnel/Anti-Discrimination Committee**    X has resigned.  The Board accepts her resignation.  We have received many applications for her job.  We will put together a Hiring Committee.

**10.  Staff Report**    Wheel Trans will ask PPR to pilot a video on how to make bookings.  X will help.

**Actions**
- Choose people to send thank you cards to.
- Find people to help get food and drinks for the Cabaret.
- Start talking with the landlord about what our rent will be after our lease is up.
- Talk with members of the Learners' Committee about having a meeting where X can talk about the website.
- X will write a progress report on Board Access.

## Parkdale Project Read
## Board Meeting Minutes November 30, 2009

**In attendance:** Adriana, Guy, Susan, Lesley, Jo, Alice, Cristobel, Nadine, Heather and Henry!

**Agenda:**   Welcome and Introductions
Approval and Business from the last Minutes
Staff Report
Committee Reports
Other Business

**1.** Board members introduced themselves. Heather's new baby Henry was with us!

**2.** Jo read the minutes out loud. **The minutes were approved**.

**3.** The board accepted Jo's request to be Board Secretary. Lesley will support her.

**4. Business from the last Minutes**
   a. Board members are reminded to send 5 names (emails or addresses) for the direct mail fundraising.
   b. We still need to talk to the landlord about the end of our lease.
   c. Nadine will send Adriana contact information for Pinedale (our old landlord) – they owe us money.
   d. Nadine will get pocket schedules for board members to record meeting dates, and will put a schedule in the program window.

**5. Staff Report**
   a. The Holiday Party will be on December 21 at 6:30pm. It will be a potluck with entertainment and holiday gifts for learners and children.
   b. The Ministry of Colleges, Training and Universities
      – We have submitted our 'Literacy Services Plan'
      – Evadne will be visiting the program on Wednesday December 16, between 2 and 8. Board members are welcome to drop in.
   c. The program will be closed between December 23 and January 4.
   d. Project Read staff went to a workshop about poverty and education that was put on by the Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy (MTML). They thought that one of the speakers talked about poverty in ways that stereotype poor people and from an American perspective. They and some teachers from

George Brown College have written a letter to MTML with their concerns about this. MTML has posted the letter online for their members to see. There will be a learning circle at Project Read on January 21, 2010 to talk about the workshop and poverty.

## 6. Committee Reports

Learners Committee
   a. Alice read 'Ways of Strengthening our Community' from the community meeting.
   b. The learner's committee will report on community meetings and do whatever else they think needs to be done.

Finance Committee  - Will meet in January

Fundraising Committee
   a. Meeting on December 3, 2009
   b. Needs to elect a chair.

Personnel and Anti-Discrimination Committee
   a. Will meet in January
   b. Heather will collect information from Nadine and John R. about the Cost of Living Allowance.

Program Committee
   a. Adriana and Mary have talked about making a handbook that describes all the programs at Project Read.

## 7. Other Business
   a. We have applied for space in Queen Victoria Public School for parents to have learning groups while children use the gym. Thanks to Christobel for her leadership on this.
   b. The new website will be up soon at projectread.org.
   c. The Metcalf grant to develop our board ends in December. To finish we need to do workshops with other organizations. Guy is thinking about a city-wide symposium. Adriana will support him in thinking about this.
   d. We are looking for 3 or 4 new board members. Some people are interested and we have posted an ad on 'Diversity on Boards'.
   e. Project Read will apply for a Trillium Grant in March.

**8.** Next meeting January 25, 2010

*Results/Effectiveness*

*As I write this, in May, 2010, one year after procedural changes were formally adopted by the Board, I can report that these changes and accompanying changes in the Board's social dynamics have led greater participation by learners on the Board. Learners have come forward with proposals which have been adopted by the Board. Learners have become active participants in Board discussions, including budget discussions. This process is just beginning. Learners on the Board still sometimes defer to other Board members. But Board meetings are opening up.*

**Lessons Learned**

*Equity on boards of directors is a long process. Procedural change is crucial. But along with procedural change, boards must attend to accompanying changes in social dynamics, and to evolving values and attitudes in the organization.*

# 4. The Orientation of a New Board

A new Board of Directors was elected at the Annual General Meeting in June, 2009. In September, 2009, as staff support person of the Board Access Committee, I facilitated a workshop on Board process for the new Board, in collaboration with members of the committee, including the Chair of the Board, now re-elected, who had led the Board through the changes of the previous year. Consistent with the evolving dynamics of the Board, this workshop focused on values, attitudes and social dynamics as well as procedures. The plan for this workshop follows.

| | |
|---|---|
| **<u>Introduction</u>**<br><br>**Facilitator:** This workshop is the first step in learning to work together as a Board of Directors. You will start to get to know what knowledge and experience your fellow Board members bring to the Board, what we will need to do to communicate well with each other, and how Board meetings work. | 1 min. |
| **Knowledge and Experience Go Around**<br><br>**Purpose:** to identify the various kinds of knowledge and experience that people bring to the Board and affirm the value of all of these kinds of knowledge and experience.<br><br>**Facilitator:** All of us are committed to this organization. Each of us brings different knowledge and experience to the Board. On the Board, we value all of this knowledge and experience of different kinds. Take a few minutes to think about how your knowledge and experience can contribute to the work of the Board. There are markers and paper on the table if you want to draw as you think. In about five minutes, we will have a go around, where everyone will have a chance to talk about what they can contribute.<br><br>**Individual Reflection Time**<br><br>**Go Around**<br><br>The facilitator expresses appreciation for the various kinds of knowledge and experience Board Members bring. | <br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br>5 min.<br><br><br><br>20 min. |
| **Discussion on Speaking and Listening**<br><br>**Purpose:** to initiate a process of face-to-face, relational communication on the Board, and of collective responsibility for effective communication through spoken language.<br><br>**Facilitator:** In this exercise, I'm going to ask you to talk with the person next to you about what helps you to speak and what helps you to listen. We all have different speaking and listening styles. What makes it easier for you to speak? What makes it easier for you to listen? After we've talked in pairs for about 10 minutes, I'm going to ask each of you to share one important point about speaking and one important point about listening with the group.<br><br>**Paired discussion**<br><br>**Group discussion** | <br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br>10 min.<br><br>20 min. |
| **How PPR Board Meetings Work**<br><br>**Purpose:** to introduce PPR Board procedures, including the new procedures approved by the last Board.<br><br>**Overview by Adriana** | <br><br><br><br>10 min. |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Discussion facilitated by Guy about how to get information and how to get into the discussion** | 20 min. |
| **Concluding Questions and Remarks** | 4 min. |

# 5.  Sharing Results with other Community Organizations

On Saturday, March 27, 2010, Parkdale Project Read hosted a symposium for other community organizations to report on our project and raise the issue of board access in community organizations for discussion and exploration.  The symposium was called "Moving Beyond Tokenism:  Strengthening Community of Community Boards of Directors."

The symposium was facilitated by two PPR staff members and three Board members.  Other PPR Board members and staff attended, as well as representatives of Parkdale Activity Recreation Centre, Parkdale Community Health Centre, Parkdale Community Legal Services, East Scarborough Storefront, The Toronto Drop-In Network, Charlie's Freewheels, Agincourt Community Services Association and Literacy for East Toronto.

Discussion at the symposium established several important points.

- Tokenism is an ongoing issue in community organizations.  There was unanimity on this, by staff and board members.  Some board members articulated the challenges of finding themselves in discussions which they felt they did not understand, and remaining silent.  Others spoke of struggling alone to learn the ropes, trying to understand what was going on.  One expressed pride that after serving for four years on Parkdale Project Read's Board he finally felt that he was truly contributing to the discussion.  Everyone, including the participants from Parkdale Project Read, agreed that this issue was not being adequately addressed in their organization.
- Board access requires staff support.  A Board is a resource, but it is also a place of learning.  This learning needs facilitation, and staff can provide facilitation support.
- Democracy and community agency are essential to the health of community organizations, and should be a priority for funders.  Funders need to look beyond "service provision" and understand that community access is an "outcome" in its own right.  Most community

organizations, including Parkdale Project Read, are not funded to support democratic and accessible board process, which requires staff time. Under current funding arrangements, this staff time is either donated or diverted from other essential work.

- A lack of board access weakens community organizations by maintaining barriers across differences of class, race, ethnicity and education. It undermines their efforts to create community alliances to address issues of equity and poverty.

- Community organizations need to network and share information about this issue.

Regarding this last point, important information was shared at the symposium. For example, a member at Parkdale Activity Recreation Centre (PARC) told us that members of PARC's committees and board are given cell phones with $10/month plans if they do not have reliable access to a phone. This keeps them in the discussion loop between meetings, and keeps them from being excluded from important discussions.

The participants at the symposium shared emails and agreed to keep in touch. They agreed that it would be important to work together to try to obtain funding for board development. Currently, government funding does not provide support for board development. Lack of funding in this area may be the legacy of assuming that board members will be privileged individuals who will be able to draw on resources to support board development.

Acknowledging power of theses kinds of assumptions, a significant part of the symposium was devoted to the characterization of "traditional" and "counter-traditional" board members, who we expect to see on a board of directors and who we do not expect to see. The following characteristics of "traditionally not excluded board members" and "counter-traditional boards" were identified in that discussion, as recorded on flip-chart notes.

**Traditionally not excluded board members**

- middle class
- formally educated
- often white
- employed
- comfortable with power
- number of self-regulated professions (i.e. lawyers, doctors, social workers)

- organizations with more money tend to have more male board members, more white board members.  Organizations with less money tend to have more female board members, organizations with essentially no money tend to have more people of colour on their boards

- sense of entitlement – taking space, language

- people with privilege are encouraged to become board members, bringing connections and wealth

- have time, space, good incomes

**Counter-traditional boards**

- accommodate and value lived experience

- less paper

- shorter meetings

- accessible language

- give feedback about lived experience

- board process is relational

- survivors, marginalized by race and class, intersections

This discussion led to a discussion of barriers to participation and strategies for addressing these barriers, recorded as following in flip-chart notes.

**Some barriers to participation**

- allies blocking progress by wanting to do things in traditional ways

- holding power/keeping power

- easier not to change things

- hard to find staff time to support change

**Addressing the barriers**

- find resources:  budget for board, board retreat, training for board members
- assist board members by providing travel expenses, food, cell phones, child care
- challenge funders' expectations about what kind of board processes are appropriate
- set up processes that work for everyone, so people don't need to self-identify as dealing with barriers

This discussion was followed by presentations on Parkdale Project Read's experience during the project funded by the Metcalf Foundation, as outlined in the first section of this report.  These presentations emphasized the importance of interpersonal dynamics in participatory board meetings, within a framework of assumptions and procedures that values full participation and challenges traditional assumptions about what counts as important knowledge and experience.

The Board Chair, Adriana Beemans, described how the use of the speaking toggles puts the onus on the Chair to include people who want to speak.  Creating a feeling of openness, while ensuring that a meeting moves along, addresses urgent business, and does not impose on Board members by running late, is an art, requiring social skill more than adherence to tradition.

The Secretary, Jo Petite, talked about the hard work of writing minutes that were short and in plain language.  She said that this was also interesting work, and feels that they result in more readable and useful minutes for everyone.  Nothing seems to have been lost by reducing verbiage.

The Chair of the Anti-Discrimination Committee, Heather Lash, spoke to the importance of appreciating how more socially cohesive and procedurally uncluttered board meetings work better for everyone on the Board, allowing the Board to move beyond questions about what works for "us" and what works for "them" to ask:  "What works?"

The staff representative to the Board, Nadine Sookermany, talked about how much easier and more productive her work is now that Board meetings require her to generate more paper documents for meetings.

As staff support person for the Board Access Committee, I said that I felt that it had been useful to attend Board meetings as a staff person without responsibility for representing staff, or a Board member, but simply keeping an eye on process and social dynamics, and feeding my observations back to the Board Access Committee and to the Board.

The plan for the symposium follows.

| 10:00:00 AM | Welcome, introductions, name of organization<br><br>• Purposes of the symposium<br>• To explore the problem of tokenism on community boards of directors and how to move beyond it.  By tokenism, we mean failing to involve all the members of a board fully in discussion and decision-making. Members who are not fully involved become "tokens," people who are physically present but not fully involved.<br>• This exploration will focus both on how boards can become more successful social units.  Part of the exploration will involve changes to board procedure that take advantage of our social intelligence by putting face-to-face interaction in the foreground and written language in the background.<br>• A starting point for this exploration will be Parkdale Project Read's Board Access Project, a one-year project on board reform supported by the Metcalf Foundation.  We hope that this project can inform other boards who are concerned about tokenism.<br>• As we discuss the issues and challenges of reforming boards, specific ideas for reform might emerge.  But it is not our purpose to come away from this symposium with action plans.  We believe that action plans must come from within programs, drawing on the history, philosophy and practical needs of each program. | Guy |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 10:30 | 'Traditional' and 'Counter-Traditional' Board Members<br><br>When talking about social exclusion, barriers and access to decision-making power in community based organizations, the inevitable questions of language, identity and social location arise…<br><br>We decided to use the terms traditional and counter-traditional community board members. These terms attempt to distinguish between those who traditionally have meaningful access to boards of directors, and those who are most often marginalized from and/or tokenized within/on boards. We describe the second group as counter, rather than non-traditional to acknowledge the agency/power of this group to create change and transformation on boards and in programs and organizations.<br><br>2 flip-charts with 2 questions – people get up and write on the flip-charts<br><br>What makes a traditional board member?<br>What makes a counter-traditional board member?<br><br>Discussion: Read through the flip charts and ask: What do counter-traditional board members offer community organizations? | Jo |

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| | Summarize: mention or re-iterate oppression awareness (name class and education and intersections with race, culture, gender/identity, (dis)ability, sexuality etc.) as well as diversity of knowledge, and integrity of community organizations in representing communities. | |
| 11:00 | PPR's Board Access Project<br><br>Procedural changes<br>How I facilitate:  self reflection by Adriana on she takes advantage of the<br>    new procedures to make the board work relationally, as a social unit<br>Comments by Jo on the secretary's role<br>Comments by Heather on the committees<br>Comments by Nadine on the staff rep's role<br>Comments by Guy on the staff support person's role | Adriana, with additional comments by Jo, Heather, Nadine, Guy |
| 11:45 | Break | |
| 12:00 | Moving beyond tokenism<br><br>Break into groups.  Some groups focus on the problems they've observed.  Other groups focus on the dynamics of change.  These topics are connected, of course, so the discussions will overlap, but hopefully the different kinds of focus will provide us with a broader concluding discussion.  Groups write important points on flip charts. | Guy gives instructions |
| 12:30 | Concluding discussion<br><br>Flip charts put up on wall.<br><br>Where do we go with this?  Setting the stage for change. | Adriana |
| 1:00 | Concluding remarks | Adriana |

# 6. Evaluation

In our proposal to the Metcalf Foundation, we listed the following indicators of progress.

- Positive feedback from learners on the Board.

- A positive evaluation, at an evaluation meeting by the Learner's Committee.

- Positive feedback from the volunteers on the Board.

- Positive feedback from the staff collective.

- Increased participation at Board meetings by learners on the Board.

- Increased interest by learners in the program in standing for the Board of Directors.

- Increased insight by volunteers and staff of learners' perspectives on Board process, in the stated judgement of learners on the Board.

- More enjoyable, less monotone Board meetings, in the stated judgement of all participants at Board meetings, including participants who are not Board members. (All PPR participants are invited to Board meetings.)

- Steps by other organizations toward making similar changes in the procedures of their boards, or in other decision-making venues they are involved with.

The kinds of positive feedback listed were continuous during the project. Learners on the Board have stated that they feel more involved in Board discussion and decision making and have a better idea of what is going on at Board meetings. Non-learner members of the Board have stated that they enjoy meetings more, have a better idea of where learners on the Board are coming from and feel more connected as a group. The staff collective has acknowledged increased learner involvement at Board meetings. In response to the suggestion of a learner on the Board, a community meeting will be held early in June to encourage learners to get involved on the Board and on committees. At the Symposium, staff and board members at other organizations spoke positively of the changes to Board procedure at Parkdale Project Read and said that they would take ideas back to their organizations.

There has been no formal evaluation meeting of the Learners' Committee. This reflects the difficulty that this committee has had meeting and the lack of involvement in the committee by learners who are not Board members. Strengthening the Learners' Committee is a priority for Parkdale Project Read, and will be addressed at the community meeting in early June. But the fact of this meeting, coming out of a suggestion by a learner on the Board, is itself an indicator of the way in which learners

have begun to take on issues of governance at Parkdale Project Read.

Through this project, Parkdale Project Read has taken a small step, but one that makes it significantly stronger, a community organization working for grassroots community governance. We believe that this strength will benefit the Parkdale community as a whole. Two learners on our Board are involved in community activism, one at another community organization and one at the parent council at a Parkdale public school. We believe that they will take whatever they have learned on our Board of Directors with them to other meetings and places of discussion and decision making in the community.

# Conclusion: Literacy, Poverty, Equity

It is no accident that this project was undertaken by a community literacy program. In community literacy programs, staff and volunteers with privileged backgrounds discover that fluency in dominant literacy practices does not make them smarter or more effective. It simply makes it harder for them to negotiate ways of using language that will work in circles that extend beyond their own privileged social group.

In the socially dominant view, poverty and inequity can be eliminated by bringing people living in poverty "up to standard" in their literacy practices. In the view of many with firsthand experience working with adult literacy learners, poverty and inequity will only be eliminated when language is not used as a barrier, but as a door through which people can bring themselves, their own identities and ways of using language. This view assumes a willingness to negotiate social interactions, including how written language, spoken language and signed language are used in these interactions.

Language is only one of the barriers to working together across social difference. But it is a barrier that is often not perceived, or perceived as a barrier resulting from some peoples' "lack of skills" rather than from our common failure to negotiate language practices that will work for everyone.

**The Board Access Committee**

Adriana Beemans (Board Chair), Chistobel Charles (Board Member),  Margaret Evans (Board Member),  Guy Ewing (staff support person), Lesley Mackay (Board Member)


**Facilitators of the Board Orientation Workshop**

Adriana Beemans (Board Chair), Guy Ewing (Project Facilitator)


**Facilitators for "Moving Beyond Tokenism:  Strengthening Community on Community Boards of Directors"**

Adriana Beemans (Board Chair),  Guy Ewing (Project Facilitator), Heather Lash (Board Member and Chair of the Parkdale Project Read Anti-Discrimination Committee), Jo Petite (Board Secretary), Nadine Sookermany (staff representative to the Board)

# About Parkdale Project Read

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Parkdale Project Read (PPR) was initiated in 1980, by Rita Cox, Head Librarian at the Parkdale Branch of the Toronto Public Library and longtime community activist, in response to enquiries at the library about how to get help with reading and writing.  By 1986, it had become an independent community program, supported by the Parkdale Branch and governed by a community Board of Directors.  Now located in a storefront at King and Dufferin, PPR supports free one-to-one tutoring and small learning groups for approximately 70 adult literacy learners.  Group learning focuses on topics such as writing, math, computers, women's issues, community action and issues of psychiatric survivors.  Tutoring and the small group facilitation follow a collaborative, holistic, anti-oppressive model, in which learners determine what they want to learn and how they want to learn it.  The children of adult literacy learners attending our program are welcome, and receive homework support in the evening from a child support worker. We participate in the Daily Bread Food Bank and the Hope Community Garden.  We are partners with Literacy Through Hip Hop, a Toronto-wide literacy program for youth.  In collaboration with George Brown College, PPR provides upgrading classes three mornings a week for learners seeking admission to community college or university.  Learners are voting members of the community and serve on committees and the Board of Directors. Programming is coordinated by a staff collective in collaboration with adult literacy learners and volunteers from the community.

Our mandate is:

- to provide a supportive environment for literacy learning by adults, 16 and older, who are fluent in English but disadvantaged and isolated by their difficulty with written language;
- to involve literacy learners and tutors from the community in directing the program;
- to continue to strengthen the program in response to the needs of the participants;
- to promote understanding of the needs of literacy learners in Parkdale;
- to assist community groups in Parkdale to provide services for people who have difficulty accessing services and information because they have difficulty using written language.