REVIEW ESSAY

Kading, T. (Ed.). (2018). *No straight lines: Local leadership and the path from government to governance in small cities*. Calgary, AB: University of Calgary Press.

Reviewed by Jennifer Jilks, a retired teacher

What does it mean to live in a small city? Metropolises tend to get a lot of attention, but many Canadians spend their lives in significantly smaller urban centres. Social issues in smaller cities are fueled by the same systemic problems faced in larger centres, and there's some important work being done to address these problems. In this edition, we examine how action research explores issues around critiquing and reconceiving community in small cities.

This book contains research (practical and theoretical) on strategies for community leadership, with a focus on the themes of equality of quality of life and quality of place.

In the introductory chapters, Editor Terry Kaling feels that social capital, especially in large cities, is lacking with a decline in civic engagement. I would disagree, as I know many people my age and older who continue to be contributing members of society. Now that we are retired, we have moved away from volunteering as young parents with Scouts, sitting on Parent Councils, fundraising for our children's groups including our religious affiliations, to supporting others in our community.

Kading writes of social capital. There are those who are "bridging social capital" (creating capital between various groups) and those creating "vertical social capital," by linking governments (municipal, regional, provincial, or federal) to the community, and to volunteers who believe in transformative leadership. The sagas in these stories around the politics of community groups, seizing government funding and sustainability, are heroic, as the politicians seem to work in four-year cycles.

The chapters outline the required research, the community-based projects, and volunteer activities, conducted by faculty and students from Thompson Rivers University (TRU), all designed to improve quality of life. Community-Based Research at TRU is an important part of their mandate. There are many lessons to learn. They have examined the needs of community in the city of Kamloops (defined as a “small city” with a population of 90,000), where TRU is located.

The projects highlight the tensions between different levels of government, which are more concerned with temporary shelters, eliminating pan handling and public intoxication, and hiding the visible homeless; and those who create opportunities, such as Rent banks, where the homeless can get a hand up in first and last month’s rent. The chapter by anthropologist Lisa Cooke documents an organic collaboration detailing the Shower Project, as another example. United Steelworkers Local 7619, with 1100 members, worked with TRU to build an on-demand shower room in the ASK Wellness Centre in Kamloops. An act of community engagement, the shower room is one example of a small-scale intervention that empowers those who may have a job interview, or a chance for housing. It reminded me of our Habitat for Humanity projects, with whom we’ve volunteered!

The participatory research of those involved in co-creating a play for and about the homeless caught my attention. I was involved in creating plays with my students, a cooperative, dynamic process that empowers participants through the use of brainstorming, and improve, using theatre, drama, and integrative, collaborative techniques. The process was fascinating, essentially when the mix of participants comes from a diverse socioeconomic background.

Another chapter focused on the community vegetable garden in Kamloops. It was enlightening. We are used to examples of guerilla gardening for simple beauty, but this project was strictly citizen-led engagement using human capital. They define natural, cultural, human, social, political and financial capital in this chapter. The results were amazing.

The final project, Kamloops Adult Learning Society (KALS), documents the collaboration between those in the community who are adult learners, banking the human capital available through a wide, rich group of 50 volunteers, 285 members, providing 100 courses of learning. This is the University of the Third Age (U3A). Using strategies adopted by KALS will engage all learners interested in facilitating a strong, vibrant community of learners.

“Canadian senior learners are keen – not only to learn but also to organize and communicate with fellow learners.” (p. 179)

I believe in Action Research. It is how I live my life, now that I am retired. We all need to be lifelong learners. One articulates a question, does some theoretical research reviews, attempts to connect theory with practice, in order to come up with a plan: all for enlightenment, work, or play. We then review, reflect, revise, and repeat. If these are your interests, it is well-worth the read. ■■