

Five decades of *Connexions*

The project that became *Connexions* had its beginnings in 1975. The early 1970s saw a flowering of grassroots activism across Canada. Dozens of groups and projects, most of them locally based, emerged to tackle problems in and beyond their individual communities. Was there a way, people started asking, to share experiences and ideas with other people across the country doing similar work?

Discussions around this perceived need to share led to a decision, in October 1975, to found the *Canadian Information Sharing Service*. (In 1978, the name was changed to *Connexions*, a name that succinctly sums up the project's *raison d'être* in both French and English.) People involved in social justice work across the country were asked to send descriptions of their work, and copies of their publications, to a volunteer collective that set up shop in the basement of a United Church building in downtown Toronto. These volunteers read the materials that were submitted, wrote succinct abstracts describing them (in English or French), and then produced a newsletter sent out to contacts across the country.

The first issue of the newsletter included a graphic history of the genesis of the project, and set out criteria for what was to be included. The priority was to be “alternate materials” generated in Canada, dealing with Canada or Canada’s international activities. The emphasis was on action: “an action undertaken by a group or individual and reflection on that action,” or “an analysis moving toward action,” but also on “critical analysis of structures, systems or institutions.”

Forty-nine years later, the issues addressed in those first newsletters seem remarkably current. *Connexions* described and analyzed issues such as homelessness, poverty, lack of affordable housing, mercury contamination at Whitedog and Grassy Narrows First Nations, indigenous struggles to protect their lands from ‘resource development,’ workers organizing to form unions, struggles for women’s rights, the challenges facing immigrants and refugees, racism, military spending, conditions in prisons, and human rights abuses in places where Canadian corporations were active, such as Chile, Uruguay, Central America, South Africa, and the Philippines. Some of the language used to describe issues may have changed, but the problems, and the power structures underlying them, remain all too familiar.

“The struggle of humanity
against power is the struggle
of memory against forgetting.”

- Milan Kundera

Preserving stories and memories

At first, there was no thought that Connexions would build an archive. The idea was simply to share current information about publications, projects, groups, and networks. That work continues: several hundred newly published items are added to the Connexions database and the Connexions website every year.

The Connexions Archive emerged, as many grassroots archives do, more or less by accident. The documents that were sent in were valuable and interesting, and taken together constituted a many-faceted picture of social justice activism in Canada. It seemed only right to preserve them. As individual projects arose, and then wound down over time, it also became apparent that in many instances the copies of their publications held by Connexions might well be the only surviving copies. And so, over time, Connexions acquired a dual identity: a project dealing with current projects and publications, but also, thanks to its longevity and systematic cataloguing, an unparalleled archive of Canadian grassroots activism.

Making connexions

Part of what makes Connexions unique is precisely its focus, from the very beginning, on *making connexions*. The people who founded Connexions wanted to establish connexions across the country, as well as internationally, with people engaged in similar struggles.

The founding vision was also clear that seemingly different issues were in fact connected, and the analyses presented in Connexions sought to analyze and draw attention to those connexions. Racism, sexism, poverty, housing, environmental degradation and many other problems were not separate issues, Connexions maintained, they were all part of a system.

Over time, as the Archive developed, the historical dimension of Connexions' work also became increasingly apparent. In the 49 years of Connexions' existence – and of course long before that as well – people have joined together to fight against injustice and sought to create a better world. The stories preserved in grassroots archives like Connexions remind us that in our own activism and struggles, we are linked to those who stood up for justice and freedom before us, and those who will continue the struggle in the future. We are part of a continuum.

The vision of “making connexions” is the thing, more than anything else, that makes Connexions unique even in the world of people's history projects and archives. Most projects focus on a particular group of people, or a particular theme or issue. Connexions was ‘intersectional’ long before the word ‘intersectional’ even came into use, emphasizing precisely the connexions between groups, people, identities, issues, and widely dispersed communities.





International connexions

Connexions is part of an international network of people's history projects: the Connexions website links to more than 60 such projects. For many years, a key aspect of Connexions' activities as a working archive was an international internship program. Interns and volunteers came to Connexions from Belgium, Britain, Cameroon, China, France, Germany, Haiti, India, Japan, Korea, Mauritius, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, Panama, Philippines, Russia, Rwanda, Singapore, Slovakia, South Africa, Sudan, Switzerland, Taiwan, Tibet, Turkey, and the USA, as well from different parts of Canada. We have also had remote volunteers working from their homes in Australia, Brazil, Denmark, Egypt, Italy, Lebanon, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, and Sweden. Our current group of more than a dozen volunteers continues to represent the wide diversity of backgrounds that marks the population of Toronto.

Securing a future for the past

Connexions' long-term goal is to establish a permanent home that will allow us to continue as a *living archive*, a place where researchers can continue to use the collection and engage with the stories and struggles of those who created the materials in the archive. This will also be a place where Connexions' dynamic group of volunteers can continue to digitize, catalogue, and develop interpretive materials and exhibits, both online and in physical formats.

"Within the broader realm of archives, Connexions fills a unique, indispensable and ultimately dynamic role – documenting Canadian grassroots movements for social and environmental justice. Because these movements tend to be ignored or misrepresented in the mainstream present, they can fade too easily and irretrievably into oblivion. Connexions ensures that their legacy – a vital part of our shared legacy – remains alive and accessible."

- Michael Riordon, author of *An Unauthorized Biography of the World: Oral History on the Front Lines*

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