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Preaching What We Practice: Theories-in-Use in Community Development

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Abstract. This paper examines theories-in-use among community development practitioners and attempts to bridge the schism between practice and theory by articulating implicit theories utilized in practice.

This paper began with a conversation between two colleagues, one from the U.S. and one from Australia. Both are community development professors, involved in practice and theory creation. During the conversation, the two professors reflected on a community development conference both were attending. They realized that most of the presentations were made by people involved in community outreach and service and that more information was presented about how to do things than about theories or models. They questioned whether it could be assumed from the conference that community development professionals do not utilize theory to guide their practice.

The co-authors of this paper began a series of reflective discussions about whether this might be true. Neither were willing to accept this premise. We believe that 1) practitioners do not take the time to write for journals about their community development efforts, and 2) practitioners will tell you that they are too busy doing community development to discuss much of their work with colleagues. However, we also believe that practitioners do have theories and models that guide their community development efforts. It was this assumption that caused us to conduct interviews with several community development professionals. Each of the people interviewed have extensive outreach experience as they represent a large southeastern university. We wanted to find out what practitioners say about theory and its relationship to practice.

Purpose Statement

The actions of community developers are designed to assist adults to reflect, analyze, problem solve, and eventually implement strategies to solve problems in their communities (Vella, 1994). These can range anywhere from how to solve economic problems and invite appropriate industries to their region to addressing environmental concerns. Schön (1983, 1991) has documented the need for professionals to *know what* and *know why* about their practice. Do they *know what* they are doing? Have they looked at the short and long-term impact of their practice, especially related to change? Have they engaged learners or clients in discussing the short and long range impacts? Have they analyzed the impact of change on organizations and systems that serve clients and communities? From an adult education and community development perspective *knowing why* is also important (Schön, 1983, 1991). Why is change needed? Is the need or pressure for change coming from outside the community or from demands external to the adult learner? Are communities, clients, and learners discussing the need for change themselves?

Mezirow (1990) has suggested that individuals and groups may have a disorienting dilemma that they identify through dialogue and discussion. Some call this an *ugly baby* in community development practice. The point is that groups know there are dilemmas in the community that need attention, e.g., abandoned cars in neighborhoods, substandard housing, poorly-kept businesses, lack of jobs, or environmental issues. Community members have intimate knowledge

of the problems in the community and they also have creative and practical solutions to addressing these needs (Moore & Brooks, 1996).

Our basis and some of our biases for proposing this approach are that adults have knowledge of their environment, they know the political structure of the community, and they are eager to learn how to put their interests, knowledge and skills to work in making their community a better place to live for residents. They also demand that a broad cross-section of the community be involved in dialogue, discussion, sharing, problem posing, problem solving, and the action-learning and planning process (Watkins & Marsick, 1993).

Many practitioners in community development work from implicit theories and may not articulate a relationship between their theories-in-use (Hunt, 1987) and theories in existing literature. While they may be accused of being *theory-lite*, in fact, practitioners utilize literature-based theory more than they talk about and may alter or combine theories. Alternatively, they may be creating theory, but this information is often lost because practitioners do not take the time to record it. The theoretical basis from which they work are neither documented, nor disseminated. The purpose of this study is to discuss theories-in-use with several experienced practitioners to examine what informs their practice, in essence theorizing from practice to literature. This study attempts to bridge the schism between practice and theory by articulating implicit theories utilized in practice. This research serves several functions: 1) to better understand what informs the actions of practitioners--not only what they do, but why, 2) to document and disseminate the theoretical basis for practice in community development, 3) to communicate to peers, communities, administrators, and regulators what practitioners do, and 4) possibly to facilitate training of new community developers/adult educators.

Research Design

In the Fall of 1997, we interviewed ten individuals who work as community development specialists or adult education professors providing group process and technical assistance to communities. Four females and six males were included who ranged in age from 38 to 66 years. All respondents had experience in working with both urban and rural communities in the southeastern United States. Five had international experience. Seven had doctorate degrees and three did not, although one of these three is currently working on their doctorate.

Each open-ended interview began with the question: *What guides your practice?* At times, this question was clarified with a further question: *Are there theories, models, or frameworks that guide what you do when you are working with community groups?* Each interview lasted approximately one hour. The first several interviews focused on literature that participants were reading, the next several focused on metaphors of practice, and during the last few interviews there was more emphasis on reflective practice, and possibly a more philosophical approach to community development. The interview approach was modified to focus more on what practitioners actually do and what guides them in that, which may or may not be based in literature.

Interview notes were copied for each author and then reviewed. The co-authors discussed the interviews as they were conducted and each author wrote brief summaries identifying themes and ideas. At the end of the interview process, the authors discussed the summaries, identified additional items, topics, or themes. Charts illustrating demographics, ideas, metaphors, issues, and themes were prepared and checked with the original transcripts for accuracy. Pseudonyms were created for all individuals. We refer to the people we interviewed as practitioners, participants, or community developers. Pseudonyms are used when a comment represents the ideas of one or just a few participants. However, if something represents the feelings of the majority, we refer simply to practitioners.

Themes/Results

Two separate categories of themes emerged, one regarding actual steps used in practice and one regarding characteristics of practitioners. Discussions with practitioners suggested they used similar processes in working with

groups beginning with sharing a vision, then developing action plans, and finally not neglecting to report back and follow up. It is first necessary to determine the problem(s) or need(s) in the community and most practitioners felt it was useful to have community groups tell their story. Storytelling creates synergy and allows people to talk about their successes, and express their hopes and fears for the future. Audrey, Bill, and Jim suggested using a variety of reporting techniques to have clients describe their situation. What were they proud of and what needed attention? Also, practitioners expressed interest in finding out from clients what they wanted to change or what they wanted their community to look like in the future. Jim, Sam, and Ed described techniques and activities used to encourage clients to envision the future. Community members were invited to document the gap between the future and the current situation and Maureen, Gail, and Gary have sent community members out with cameras to photograph what they wanted to preserve and what they wanted to eliminate or transform. This provides the impetus to develop action plans with concrete projects to implement. Bill, Sam, and Maureen pointed out that what is often missing from this type of change approach is following up on what has been implemented. Were the futures ideas achieved? What really changed? What barriers were encountered and broken down? Also, how do people in communities find out about what happened? What gets reported about changes? These were some of the process issues related to practitioners' discussions and descriptions of their community development work.

Complex Communities and Knowledge. Practitioners recognize the complexity of communities as well as conflicting views and interests. Far more than a locality, they view communities as multifaceted, consisting of complex relationships. Several practitioners spoke of trying to get as many different voices into the discussion as possible. They also spoke of trying not to round up the 'usual suspects,' in other words those most likely to speak, but to include new faces and voices representative of the broader community.

Participants resisted using an expert-model, in which practitioners approach a community saying, *we are here to help you* (Roncoli and Flora, 1995). When invited to work with a community, practitioners felt it imperative to take time to listen, to learn, to question, to share, to discuss, and be immersed in the community's activities to understand what is going on. Bill, Sam, and Maureen said it is important to listen and acknowledge that people have understanding of their communities and needs. Sam said you must listen to people before you add, and then draw out their knowledge of the problem and discuss alternative solutions. When trying to bring people into a meeting, Bill spoke of the need to listen to many different voices, and build in tension and conflict on issues early so that all aspects of a problem are in view. Gary pointed out that everybody lives downstream from someone. It does not make sense to focus on one aspect of an issue or exclude the needs of a group within the community. There is evidence that marginalized people are beginning to resist the placement of destructive industries in their community and that, sometimes, more privileged people will join them recognizing that what affects their neighbors will affect them as well. People from different backgrounds can provide different knowledge. Kanter (1995) refers to this in her description of *locals* and *cosmos* in which long-term local people have a sense of place and historical knowledge, but cosmopolitan newcomers can provide a sense of the big picture as well as needed skills. Both are needed for communities to flourish.

Another reason it is important to involve everyone in the community, instead of working with the recognized power brokers, is so that all aspects of the problem and consequences of proposed solutions can be addressed. Many times, practitioners are invited to work with a group and find members of the group already believe they have diagnosed the problem and come up with a solution. A practitioner may be brought in to facilitate the desired change, however, community developers can assist communities to resist inappropriate simplification and to refrain from imposing false and premature solutions (Moore & Brooks, 1996; Wheatley, 1992).

Imperative for Inclusiveness. Practitioners felt an imperative for inclusiveness. Communities have many different personalities, special interests, needs for improvements, and resources. Communities are complex social groups that produce conflict over ideas, proposals, and needs for change. Because of their complexity and many different voices it is important that a broad cross-section of the community be represented in efforts discussing issues and suggesting changes for the future. Inclusiveness also demands that community members listen to each other and try to understand different perspectives. Practitioners felt so strongly about the need for inclusiveness that they would opt out of working with the group or community if people were being excluded from the community development effort.

Use of Metaphor. Many practitioners utilized metaphors extensively. While these may be taken to be folksy, they function as powerful and graphic expressions of ideas. Metaphors encapsulate information quickly and efficiently and are often used to generate reactions and clarify issues and ideas. Examples of metaphors include the idea from Chuck

about an orchestra in which several different instrument groups perform together much like different interests and needs in communities interact to make up the whole. The community that can coordinate its many different interests into a program or plan of action can also create an enjoyable place to live and work. Other images such as a *dog sled team* (if you are not the lead dog or leader in the community, the scenery never changes) or *hardening of the categories* (in which people are unwilling to enlarge their understanding of issues) are metaphors that communicate the state or possibility of change in communities.

Metaphors need to be used selectively since they may define who is and who is not a group member. Understanding metaphors requires cultural knowledge. Words have different meanings in different contexts and community development practitioners need to be aware of this since metaphors can have intended and unintended results. It is quite possible to inadvertently exclude or insult people by inappropriate use of metaphors and language. In addition, community development practitioners learn to time their use of metaphor judiciously. Overuse tends to reduce impact. Nevertheless, careful use of metaphor seemed to be a powerful way of expressing practice ideas and needs.

Integrity as a Guide for Practice. Several practitioners spoke of integrity as a guide for practice. Maureen captured the essence of her practice in these propositions:

1. projects should be meaningful; effort should be oriented toward producing real and sustainable solutions to pressing problems,
2. client groups should be inclusive and represent the community,
3. projects should involve something to which the answer is not yet known,
4. projects should be seen in light of a broader context.

Practitioners suggested they felt an obligation to inform and educate clients about community issues. Practitioners develop knowledge of environmental issues, as well as political and social costs, which should be shared. Because of their extensive experience and knowledge, Maureen, Sam, and Bill felt a need to inform community groups about issues from a broader perspective. Abbie said, ‘we are required to educate so people can make informed choices.’ Chuck believed practitioners need to ‘keep bringing up the big picture.’ Community members need both a sense of place and a sense of context (Kanter, 1995). Practitioners spoke of having a larger contextual perspective on community and often had knowledge of how local, state, or national regulations could affect a community’s initiatives. As part of the educative process, practitioners spoke of encouraging community groups to think of how their local problems are interconnected with regional, national, or international issues and problems. Practitioners emphasized that this was not intended to create barriers to community action, but was meant to assist people to think more deeply about their problems and ideas.

Theory as a Guide for Practice. Jean indicated that, ‘practice is guided by fragments of theories. There is a unifying theme, but not a single theory.’ Rarely did practitioners refer to using the ‘Smith model’ or the ‘Jones model.’ People used individualized blends of theories and instead of being *theory-lite*, they are actually *theory-rich* with the ability to pick and choose across backgrounds, interests, purposes and the literature. These practitioners brought knowledge of many different literatures because of their education in forestry, environmental design, communications, geography, recreation, public policy, adult education, agricultural economics, sociology, and organizational development. In addition, many are widely read and continue to look for new information and sources for ideas. Serendipitous discussions with colleagues with different backgrounds occurs during travel or in hallways which stimulates people to read more in areas they may not have inquired into before. Cross-fertilization occurs during discussion of problems and issues, thereby increasing the range of individual practitioners. It appears that more seasoned practitioners have access to a greater range of models. Abbie said that she has become more thoughtful about her work over time and questioned whether this was related to experience and/or the development of some wisdom. Theories-in-use seemed to be composed of literature-based theory, field experience and practice, practitioners’ beliefs about communities, and serendipitous, intermittent exchanges with colleagues (See Figure 1). In all cases, practitioners are seeking ways to make things work to accomplish the goals of a particular community or situation.

The purposes may be economic development, community organizing, recreation education, or environmental protection. Despite different areas of practice, what draws practitioners together are several unifying concepts: 1) recognition of the importance of inclusiveness and collaboration, 2) recognition of the fact that people have knowledge and experience and can use that for problem-solving, 3) recognition of the complexity of communities, and 4) the importance of organizing for action and following up on action plans. Practitioners utilized flexible, complex approaches to community development and saw many issues as interconnected. Rather than community development practitioners failing to have a theoretical base for their work, the people we interviewed utilized a sophisticated blend of theory, integrating literature from many different disciplines with extensive experience working with communities.

Figure 1: Thinking About Practice

