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Introducing the Community Development Concept in Ukraine: Facilitating Trans-cultural Learning

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Abstract: *This critical description of efforts to introduce community development processes in Ukraine to prepare the ground for civil society challenges our ability to “walk” our “talk.” Development efforts are impeded by controlling behaviours by Canadians and Ukrainians which are more in keeping with centralised control and antithetical to the liberatory tradition in the adult education movement.*

Beginning

This is a critique of efforts to introduce the community development concept (CDC) in Ukraine as part of a Canadian International Development Agency project titled Civil Society Community Roots. The project’s goal is:

“To contribute to the democratic reform process in Ukraine by strengthening the capacity of the NGO sector to manage itself effectively. A major focus is to engage ordinary citizens in participatory development processes, which contribute to substantive improvements in the quality of their lives.”

As I conclude my year of direct work in the project, I am convinced more than ever that issues of power and control are central themes in this project, and that Ukrainians may be more understanding of this than Canadians. Our collective struggle is to replace “power-over” behaviour with “power-with” and “power-from-within” relationships, and thereby beginning to walk the talk of civil society. To this point, I think we are proving to be better at talking than at walking.

Two different teams are involved – one team to design a program of courses about various aspects of Community Development (CD), and another team to organise CD activities in the field of practice. As will become apparent as this story unfolds, the two teams are isolated from each other. I am under contract to Grant MacEwan Community College, which is a sub-contractor to the Canadian Bureau for International Education, as a “content expert” for one of the six courses in that part of the four-year project creating an Institute for Voluntary Sector Management and Development. My course – I use the possessive form to distinguish this course from others in the project rather than claiming ownership – is titled “Community Mobilisation, Participatory

Development and Gender Issues”. My course team met three times during 1999 – for a total of six weeks in Ukraine during January and November, and for one week in Canada in June. In between, there was some contact via electronic mail and this is continuing.

The community development concept (CDC) is the guiding light for my course. I define the CDC as a dynamic relationship between adult learning and social action creating local control of local affairs. It intends to democratise knowledge making so that the “social majorities” (Esteva & Prakash, 1998) reclaim some sense of being in control of their/our lives. This concept has a lengthy tradition in Canada although fading rapidly as the “global project” proceeds apace. Mexican activist Gustavo Esteva and Indian educator Madhu Prakash (1998) use the term “global project” to allude to the current collection of policies and programs, principally promoted all over the world by the governments of the industrial countries with the help of their “friends” – the international institutions and corporations equally committed to the economic integration of the world and the market credo. Do we have the will and courage to revive the CDC tradition? Can a dialogue with colleagues in Ukraine – a place we are told there is no CDC – help us/me in this revival? Yes, and the dialogue is growing. My colleagues and I continue to challenge each other, our assumptions and our biases, and we are growing stronger along the way.

Why Am I Involved?

I am involved in this project because it allows me to reflect back on my twenty-five years of exploring and living the CDC as it has been evolving throughout the world. This commitment includes a

scholarly pursuit in articulating the liberatory tradition in the adult education movement as well as a practical activity in my routine practice of community-based adult education. The liberatory tradition (Welton, 1993) calls for the emancipation of humankind from all forms of oppression be they based on sex, class, race, sexual orientation, age, disability or religion. That tradition aims to create “power-with” relationships to replace “power-over” relationships as envisioned by American philosopher Eduard Lindeman in his 1926 meaning of adult education. Extending the categories to include “power-from-within” deepens our understanding of the nature of power (Park, 2000). My intention is to re-connect with my roots in an older more socially active, more democratic adult education than mainstream adult education tied to technical and value-neutral processes (Foley, 1999).

I want to revive commitment to social action in the adult education movement so we can become a vital force in the new century. The adult education movement is not a social movement in itself. Rather, it is a movement helping social movements move. This position is similar to Australian educator Grif Foley’s (1999) study of learning in social action in which adult educators are re-connected with our action oriented past. Adult educators’ function mainly outside educational institutions – in “real-life” settings like the workplace, church/temple, community, service clubs and brotherhoods – where most learning takes place. One major difference between educational institutions and these other learning sites has to do with power. Since adult education is based on a shared power relationship between learner/teacher – a sense of mutual respect and responsibility establishing a learner/learner culture, it has always been a radical notion within the educational establishment. This view of learning is not shared – or understood – by all members of the Ukrainian Project.

My Ukrainian colleagues have taken to the concept of “liberatory tradition” more readily than I anticipated because of a need to restructure Ukrainian history to prepare the ground for civil society and community development. In a practical sense, this receptivity to the search for freedom might attract more funding from agencies supporting civil society. In a philosophical sense, it provides indigenous roots for a revived Ukrainian identity needed to smooth the way to a confident future. Focusing Ukrainian energies on a search for

freedom within their own experience and not conforming to Eastern or Western models, frees them to articulate a uniquely Ukrainian variation on the freedom theme. This approach may strengthen Ukrainian resistance to the homogenisation and standardisation intentions of the global project. Those of us Canadians wishing similar protection for ourselves in our own realities can learn from their efforts while sharing our experiences – a mutually supportive relationship.

After initial uncertainty of meaning / interpretation, Ukrainian colleagues are picking up threads in their history resembling CDC. One writes:

Here in Ukraine we also have deep roots of the civil sector. It is the part of the Ukrainian struggle for freedom. It is tightly interwoven with the processes of establishment of democracy in our history. There is an explicit tendency to create the amateur and folk arts centres in the development process of our society. This tendency cannot always be traced evenly which means that we can observe booms and crises in its development. But in my opinion this process became the most vehement in the middle of the 16th-at the beginning of the 17th centuries. At that time in the western parts of Ukraine that then belonged to Poland (the country then was one of the most democratic countries in the Western Europe) the brotherhood movement was born. The establishment of the public organizations to which the Orthodox brotherhoods belonged drew the Ukrainians drastically close to the creation of the independent state. (Words in bold print are unpublished thoughts shared by Ukrainian and Canadian colleagues.)

Such examples indicate a rich Ukrainian tradition of struggle for expression of freedom which may even pre-date similar movements in Western Europe. These traditions could be the foundational material for current interests in civil society and easily find their way into the Community Mobilisation course.

Current Variations

Ukrainian eyes are focusing on the concept of civil society since it constitutes the central idea within CSCR.

Civil society is the notion that is used to denote the whole totality of the existing relationships in the

society that are not determined by the state or political system but exist to denote such side of society's activity that is beyond the domain of the state's influence. Civil society is the emancipated from the state society, the domain of the spontaneous self-realization of individuals and voluntary created organizations of the citizens that is protected by the legislature from the direct intrusion and regulation on the part of the state.

This view of civil society is in keeping with the current literature on the subject. The fact that it seems readily adapted to Ukrainian conditions and closely related to Ukrainian liberatory traditions supports the notion that "civil society is a rediscovered rather than a new concept" (Mitlin, 1999).

The Time is Right

The Institute for Civic Education was established in 1999 at the University of Kyiv Mohyla Academy to facilitate introduction of civil society. A new NGO is associated with this initiative – the Education for Democracy Foundation – was established, according to a website listing of the action plan for the Institute, "by a group of scholars and educators as a resource centre to improve teaching about democracy and civics, assist in the formation of civil society, and facilitate the development of democratic awareness and citizen's political culture, their increased, informed and responsible participation" (<http://ukrcivnet.iatp.kiev.ua>).

Communication Challenges

We struggle with definition, interpretation and meaning, as we work in English and Ukrainian, never quite sure if we understanding one another. There are advantages in this. We are spared the dangers of thinking perfection is possible and we get on with understanding each other as human beings while not worrying too much about precise explanation and description. We might view our dialogue as an open circle. A few of us engage at the moment but others will come and go, and this is okay. Control is shared and no one person takes over. The circle grows from the project and, if strong, will out last any one of us. This leads to civil society as we learn how to treat one another respectfully and joyfully, experience emancipatory learning. Foley (1999) argues that:

Consciousness and learning are central to the processes of cultural and social reproduction and transformation. The unlearning of dominant oppressive ideologies and discourses and the learning of insurgent, emancipatory ones are central to processes of emancipatory change. But these processes of emancipatory learning and action are not straightforward; they are complex, ambiguous, contradictory. (p. 16)

Complexities, ambiguities and contradictions need not overwhelm us. Indeed, these factors are simply routine in the current state of knowledge making in the various parts of the action research family influenced by complexity theory and other attempts to explain our world. According to British systems scientist Robert Flood (2000):

Action researchers must grapple with complex interrelationships and emergent behaviour that is inherently unknowable to the human mind. Complexity theory questions whether long term intended action is possible. It points out that the way things unfold is inherently unknowable to the human mind, emerging through spontaneous self-organisation originating from some distant detail, rather than advanced planning. The most we can do is to manage what is local, whilst appreciating the incomprehensibility of global complexity. Managing what is local entails continually considering outcomes that extend over a small number of interrelationships, very few stages of emergence, over only short periods of time into the future.

There is something liberating in the idea of learning within the unknowable (Flood, 1999) and embracing contraries as articulated by American English professor Peter Elbow (1986). We are liberated from the oppressive expectation of always being right. It is in the small human scale relationships that we can hope to discover meaning and joy in life.

We ran the pilot course on Community Mobilisation in the city of Lviv in November 1999 attended by seven learners, two Ukrainian instructors, a translator and me. Everyone was excited, nervous and challenged by the opportunity to transform our words into action. Our collective and individual confidence levels fluctuated under the strain.

In the heat of the classroom, my journal reflects anxiety with the confidence level of my colleagues

and myself. We spent a few days after the pilot course ended trying to pick up the pieces, or so it seemed to me:

A sense of ending and in disappointment in my immediate colleagues and myself. The key word in all this is “confidence,” a quality I would say is largely absent from Ukraine and for many good reasons going back a long time. One colleague lacking the confidence to set aside professional powers and allow me and others in. Another colleague lacking confidence in the classroom, in academia and in the ability to comprehend and write. What about my confidence? I thought I could with my personal commitment to both colleagues create sufficient trust and mutual respect to allow us to work as a team. Encourage love and respect, and all will be well! At the same time, I could see that we needed enough structure to secure a comfortable start for our learners. I chose to avoid controlling direction hoping confidence would miraculously appear. It just hasn’t worked although I basically would have done the same thing again. (Words in italics are taken directly from my learning journal)

Rumour and innuendo exacerbated these weaknesses and the project managers were unable to provide comfort and support.

There is something controlling in the way we isolate ourselves into small groups claiming this is done in the interests of efficiency and expediency. This becomes a conflictual situation when administrative power confronts professional power. Yet even here there is room for a positive experience in CD. If the struggle for power is dealt with openly, a valuable lesson about civil society can be learned. Within these barriers lie elements that can work to facilitate dialogue. Returning to my official report, I wrote:

There were few opportunities to engage in large group discussion between all teams members and so the difficulties I was experiencing with my team – which became the subject of rumour during course delivery – remained hidden until I appealed directly and openly to the other teams. This produced some support and may have been a positive experience in itself since it brought into the open a difficulty best addressed by the whole community. This in itself was a good experience in the demands of civil society. The general problem in communi-

cation has existed throughout the project. I fear we fail to model behaviours essential to the workings of civil society and this is apparent to our Ukrainian colleagues who must wonder at our integrity.

The very fact I reached out for help seemed surprising to all. What was this authority figure doing admitting he was imperfect? One of my Canadian colleagues suggested I simply take over teaching the course! Fortunately clearer heads prevailed and I received strong support and encouragement from other Canadian and Ukrainian colleagues.

Elements Supporting Dialogue

Clearly there is an intellectual understanding among some of my colleagues about the importance of dialogue in achieving civil society through CD and liberatory adult education. There also is an intellectual understanding of the appropriate process skills.

This course presupposes the development of the skills in balancing between the different types of power, avoiding the tensions in community relations by facilitating understanding that there should exist the transforming mechanism of power into co-operation – and “power-over” into “power-from-within.”

The challenge for Canadians and Ukrainians is to acquire the confidence to walk this talk by learning the techniques and methods of liberatory adult education, and then practising them in the classroom and Online.

Dialogue is impossible without supporting behaviour, integrity and mutual respect. I could not have survived the pilot delivery of my course in Lviv without the generous support from a couple of Canadian and Ukrainian teaching colleagues. Powerful relationships were established and are proving to be sustainable with the passage of time despite cultural differences and physical distance. This phenomenon becomes the most valuable legacy of the project as the network of conversations gains a life of its own.

Ending

Rather than the usual conclusion, I end this paper about CD in Ukraine with a challenge I have issued to my colleagues calling on us to reflect on and act upon what we are learning together. Can we agree to work at weakening the barriers and strengthening

the elements supporting dialogue? If some of our colleagues are into control in a “power over” sense, do we try to weaken this and confront authoritarian behaviour? *Up till now, the various parts of the project have existed in a fragmented way. If this continues, we will see each other isolated in individual boxes and unable to enter the circles, unable to model the behaviours demanded by the CDC and civil society. It is impossible to establish, maintain and sustain relationships – whether Canadian or Ukrainian – while confined to a box and seemingly unable to walk the talk of CDC.*

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