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Embodied Community Engagement: Is a University-Based Program in Dialogue and Civic Engagement a Site of Transformational Learning?

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Recently, a mid-sized Canadian university launched a unique certificate program in dialogue and civic engagement. Taught by academics and practitioners, the program aims to synthesize diverse concepts and practices from a variety of disciplines related to civic engagement. The goal is to offer learners a mix of conceptual and practical knowledge that empowers them to become civic engagement leaders in their own communities or practice settings.

This roundtable explores what we learned and the challenges we faced as a teaching team. Based on our observations, the biggest challenge was to generate a coherent vision among teachers and learners with so many diverse interests and backgrounds. For example, “civic engagement” means different things to different people, and a good deal of the learning in the program involved exploring diverging assumptions about the fundamental premise of the course. Although several instructors began the program focusing on citizen-government engagement, after conversations with learners and teachers we have widened our focus to include citizen-citizen engagement. We define civic engagement broadly as people working together to address public issues that affect their lives. This example illustrates the major point of this paper. Our experience suggests an *adaptive management approach*¹⁰ that responds flexibly to learner needs and opportunities can successfully deal with the challenge of synthesizing and consolidating the many perspectives brought into the classroom. This approach enriches learning for all by accommodating diversity and tapping its potential. Both teachers and learners report gaining new insights and ideas about dialogue and civic engagement. Beyond the successful launch of the program, we believe the adaptive management approach can become an important tool for institutional transformation within universities and in the broader community.

Program Development: In developing the course curriculum faculty drew on material from sociology and political science, planning, activism and public consultation. Instructors were drawn from the academic disciplines of sociology/political science and urban planning and from applied fields such as film-making, communication design, activism and public consultation. Given the diversity of views and backgrounds of instructors, this could have posed a serious challenge for creating a coherent program of study. In practice, the curriculum planning was an unusually rewarding experience. Faculty with a common passion but from disciplines were able to explore their mutual interests and find common ground. This was sometimes exhilarating, as there were few opportunities within our respective fields to exchange ideas in an informal setting.

¹⁰ The practice of adaptive management is primarily used in relation to natural resource management and has application in the management of educational planning in so far as these processes involve testing assumption, adaptation and learning. Buzz Hollings. “Understanding the Complexity of Economic, Ecological, and Social Systems,” in *Ecosystems* Volume 4, No. 5, 2001.

Three principles that guided our thinking. First was the **emphasis on dialogue**, that is, an intentional process of shared exploration for the purpose of understanding. Such a process requires those involved to suspend the need for specified outcomes yet show respect and empathy, and a willingness to engage in joint assumption hunting. We attempted to apply this notion of dialogue not only to the curriculum's content and activities, but also to the process for designing the program, to reviewing its progress, to guiding the relationship between teachers and learners, and to shaping the relationship between program participants and others who would take part in practicum projects. In short, we tried to practice what we were preaching. Second, we were aware that the academic component of the program should be presented with a view to applying the knowledge out in the real world. This encouraged open discussion among faculty and learners of how particular concepts related to planning and design could be used to solve the real problems encountered by learners in their diverse community settings. Because of this, **co-learning became the ethos of the program**. Finally, the instructors recognized that the program's practicum was essentially a form of **participatory action research**. One of our research questions was to ask to what degree a small university-based program with participants not normally involved in public policy making contribute to civic institutions and practices outside the university. We were pleasantly surprised at the degree to which they were able to apply what they learned to make a difference in their particular areas of interest.

Collaborative knowledge creation: We believe the collaborative development and ongoing review of the program by the faculty was an emergent best practice for interdisciplinary knowledge generation and diffusion within the University. The learners gained access to a rich array of ideas and practices, and the instructors found themselves learning from their colleagues and students. Importantly, these collaborative meetings were supported by a program director that we affectionately referred to as the "reluctant administrator" as she excelled at convening comfortable discussions, asking generative questions and capturing the learning that emerged from faculty conversations. We believe more course development and review could benefit from this collaborative and adaptive approach to planning and teaching.

Learners as community catalysts: The teaching team and program director have tracked program impacts in terms of quality and quantity of civic engagement in the region relative to substantive issues of public concern. The program also appears to have a ripple effect that extends to other institutions. For Tara, an elected official from local government, the program experience completely modified how she sees her role as a city councillor. She now believes she should be out in the field helping to resolve differences between residents as opposed to sitting as a neutral decision-maker at public hearings waiting to be petitioned by warring groups of citizens. The public-hearing process rarely informs action, and often leaves participants tired and angry. Creating dialogues seems to leave everyone satisfied even if not everyone gets what they wanted. Tara also realized that dialogue and civic engagement could naturally be woven into other parts of her life, including her academic work. This example is one of many that shows how powerfully the tools of dialogue may be adapted to multiple institutions.

Institutional and Personal Transformation: The relationships between faculty, management and students embody an approach utterly consonant with the "material" of the curriculum, to the values of the program and those espoused by Dewey (1938) who asserted that full democracy is obtained by the engagement of citizens, experts and politicians. Applied in university-based teaching and learning this spirit of experimentation is supported by the adaptive approach to the program's management.