

**Assisting Our Communities:
Critical Awareness and Self-Direction**

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One of the biggest challenges of community colleges is determining how to best serve our communities. How we serve our communities needs to go beyond what courses and programs we offer, the types of business and industry training we provide, and the variety of continuing education and community service activities available.

I propose that it is our responsibility as adult educators and facilitators of community services and continuing education to provide leadership for the development of our communities. Community development should not be defined as the services we provide. Those services serve as tools for implementing the fuller definition of community development. Community development is assisting and leading local communities to assume responsibility for and take control of the direction of their future.

It is not the services that are in question. The question is how these services are utilized in the development process. Many times the development process is bypassed, overlooked, or started somewhere other than at the beginning. Services are offered with little regard to their relation or contribution to the total development process.

The development process must be built upon and start with the principles of lifelong learning and the adult learner. It is incorrect to assume people learn because they are in a classroom. Likewise, it is incorrect to assume that all communities will develop a sense of self-direction and assume responsibility for their future as a result of education. We, as community services educators, must provide the necessary leadership to make community development possible.

The assumptions underlying the andragogical model of adult learning (Knowles, 1990) are applicable to a degree to communities and provide a basis for the community development process. The model contains the following six assumptions: (a) a need to know, (b) the learner's self-concept, (c) the role of the learner's experience, (d) a readiness to learn, (e) an orientation to learning, and (f)

motivation.

Communities must understand that they have a responsibility for the direction of their future and that they can learn to control that direction. The community needs to be aware of the consequences of a lack of responsibility and control. Community services educators can use available resources/programs to stimulate a *need to know*.

The community's (learner's) *self-concept* is determined by its confidence in its own abilities. The community must assume responsibility for its own decisions and have confidence in those decisions for self-direction to be possible.

The *role of the learner's experience* within the community should be viewed as a resource. The experience and skill of community members is an asset to the identification of problems and their solutions.

A *readiness to learn* by the community tends to increase as community members recognize the impact of external factors upon their personal quality of life. To insure continuous improvement, there must be a constant readiness to learn by the community.

The community's *orientation to learning*, or its approach to learning, should be problem-centered. A self-directed community will learn something to the extent that it believes the learning will assist it to perform tasks or solve problems.

The foundation for these assumptions is *motivation*. Although a community may be responsive to external stimuli, internal pressures are more potent motivators. A truly self-directed community that is willing to learn from experiences in and out of its boundaries is motivated by the desire for a higher quality of life, increased internal control, and quality jobs.

I suggest these six items are the basic principles upon which community development should be built. As leaders we need to learn about our communities as they must learn more about their own potential, experience, and possibility for initiating change. The need to constantly learn is not on a time table; it is a lifelong process. If the learning process discontinues, the community becomes stagnant, lives in the past, and may be directed externally. Consequently, the process of development should start by assisting communities to become critically aware and self-directed.

Critical awareness is a process of making sense of factors external to the community--such as county, state, or federal regulations and policies--through an analysis of issues and information. Such a process and an awareness is dependent upon the existence of critical thinkers in the community and the ability of the community to critically analyze issues. Critically analyzing issues involves the identification of underlying values, rules, and beliefs that made the issue an issue. To analyze an issue is not to take it at face value but to understand its root cause and, consequently, to develop a long-term solution. In the process of identifying and analyzing issues, the community must be aware of the context in which they occur. The context--the time and culture in which we live and our beliefs--influences the direction of how an issue develops as well as the effectiveness of the solution.

Critical thinkers are initiators of community change because they are innovators. They see their future and the future of their community as open and changeable. They have the potential and the confidence to foster change (Brookfield, 1987). Such individuals and communities recognize the importance of input from external sources and the possibility of sharing control externally. They recognize the value of interdependence, not independence, where learning and experience may be gained externally with a sense of responsibility to internal issues.

A true critical awareness, in itself, is not sufficient to bring change in the form of positive community development. It is the responsibility of each individual, and thus the community, to make sense of the issues by integrating new ideas with previous knowledge and experience. To accomplish true integration, the community must act upon new perspectives and be willing to share that knowledge for further development. After all, the society in which we live is interdependent--we depend upon one another, we learn from shared experiences, and we learn which circumstances existing externally have an impact internally and vice versa.

When a community assumes responsibility for critically analyzing issues, self-direction becomes possible. A self-directed community recognizes the dynamics of external control while maximizing internal control. In this sense, the community assumes responsibility for its future while concurrently, through collaboration, sharing control of

activities. The real challenge is not shared control, but understanding the impact of external conditions on internal issues. Ultimately, learning through critical awareness is the responsibility of each community with knowledge gained through collaboration with the external world.

Our role as adult educators is to teach the importance of the community development process and to facilitate its implementation. As educators, we can help community members focus on pivotal questions. What is the community? What factors (internal and external) impact the community? What are the major issues within the community? What resources do we have at our disposal?

The community must critically analyze its answers to these questions as the first step in developing a necessary awareness. As educators we must assist with the identification, training, and nurturing of leaders--one key to the future of a community (De Pree, 1989). Leaders who allow and value opposing opinions are basic to critical analysis. Leaders must recognize the importance of a diverse group of people and ideas. Diversity in a community expands the range of experiences and knowledge from which to build and learn. Leaders must provide momentum and a feeling that their community's work is moving forward toward some goal. Leaders must not only be effective but be responsible for effectiveness. Effectiveness is achieved through enabling and allowing others to reach their potential as contributors to the development of their community. Additionally, concepts from Barker's *Future Edge* (1992, p. 12) are certainly applicable in this case. He proposes three keys to the future for any organization. I propose that these are also the keys to the future of communities. They are anticipation, innovation, and excellence.

Excellence, or to constantly strive for excellence, is important in creating an awareness, in nurturing future leaders, and in dealing with issues. Innovation, or being creative, is necessary in collaborating with the external world to learn and to gain knowledge for solutions to internal problems. The ongoing portion of critical awareness and self-direction is the anticipation of external forces and their impact on community development and the anticipation of future internal issues.

A proactive approach to community development must include an awareness of issues and resources internally as well as externally. The approach should be community driven

with a basis established that invites integration of new ideas and the willingness to share with the external world. The development process should encourage continuous learning and utilization of experience from within the community. Without continual learning, a critical awareness is not possible and, consequently, neither is self-direction. As educators we can help insure that the process is based upon the principles discussed here. These principles help us put into practice commonly held beliefs regarding the capabilities and characteristics of adult learners. The principles stem from the belief that learning is a lifelong process for all members of the community. Lifelong learning is a dynamic approach that allows for the use of a diverse range of information and individual experience. The ultimate goal of lifelong learning is the improvement of the individual's quality of life. The ultimate goal of community development is the improvement of the quality of life in the community. Learning through critical awareness and self-direction must be the driving force.

References

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