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PROMOTING COMMUNITY PRACTICE FOR SOCIAL BENEFIT



Games for participation and conscientisation

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Abstract

Information sharing and group processes are dominated by words - spoken and written words. This session will explore how different kinds of games can be used to stimulate ideas, encourage participation and discussion and lead to awareness. We will offer session participants the opportunity to take part in 2 games and share experiences about their strengths and weaknesses for community engagement and conscientisation. Each game has been developed by the community psychology team at Manchester Metropolitan University from collaborative projects on community cohesion and health inequalities. The games can be played by 4-10 players. They are not simulations and will not require role playing, although they will be fun and participative!

Key words: urban regeneration; community cohesion; participatory games; conscientisation

Introduction

The interest in university-community engagement is growing worldwide (Gaffakin and Morrisey, 2008; Watson, 2007). The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) funded a four-university collaborative project exploring community engagement by Universities in the context of urban regeneration and across four themes: community cohesion, crime, health and wellbeing, and enterprise. Each University was responsible for one theme and supported projects which:

- Combined academics from two or more of the universities;
- were developed with a community partner;
- driven by the needs of the community partner;
- were interdisciplinary;
- had clear outputs and provided value for money.

We, at Manchester Metropolitan University, were responsible for projects supported under the Community Cohesion Theme. Within this theme,

there was a focus on projects reflecting community psychology, sport and physical activity and urban education. In total 17 projects received funding and these included development, training and research projects (Kagan 2008), working with residents associations, community groups, development trusts, schools, voluntary associations and cooperatives.

What is community cohesion?

Community cohesion is a policy platform which originated in civic disturbances in Northern towns in England in 2001 (Home Office, 2005). These disturbances were largely between different ethnic groups with low life opportunities. The delivery Plan of the overall project suggested a role for Universities in developing community cohesion (URMAD, 2006:8):

Partnership working between the HE sector and their public and voluntary sector partners will encourage a sense of identity and belonging through participation in education, work and social activities, and through mutual understanding of cultural difference.

Our understanding of Community Cohesion is somewhat broader (Duggan and Kagan, 2007). We go along with the definition of a cohesive community as one, that is in a state of wellbeing, harmony and stability. (IdeA 2006, www.idea-knowledge.gov.uk)

The Local Government Association (LGA, 2004:7) considered, in its guidance to Local Authorities for how to support the development of cohesive communities, the following characteristics of a cohesive community:

A cohesive community is one where:

- there is a common vision and a sense of belonging for all communities;
- the diversity of people's different backgrounds and circumstances is appreciated and positively valued;
- those from different backgrounds have similar life opportunities; and
- strong and positive relationships are being developed between people from different backgrounds and circumstances in the workplace, in schools and within neighbourhoods

They go on to describe what is involved in creating community cohesion:

Promoting community cohesion involves addressing fractures, removing barriers and encouraging positive interaction between groups. Community cohesion is closely linked to integration as it aims to build communities where people feel confident that they belong and are comfortable mixing and interacting with others, particularly people from different racial backgrounds or people of a different faith. Diversity is, then at the heart of community cohesion, and schisms can occur in and between any areas of diversity, fracturing cohesion. The Audit Commission (2006) identified 10 areas of diversity in communities, of relevance to community cohesion. These include:

- Age equality: older people
- Age equality: young people
- Community engagement
- Customer focus
- Disability
- Gender
- Human rights
- Race
- Religion
- Sexual orientation

All of the projects worked in conjunction with community groups and they also explored different ways of engaging communities. The methods used ranged from ethnographic research with migrant groups; the use of creative methods such as film and magazine making; website development; narrative workshops; film and other creative methods; training workshop; more conventional qualitative research methods (such as interviewing – including the training of community researchers in interviewing so they collected and analysed their own data); video diaries; and world cafe discussion events.

As community psychology was one of the themes of the overall project, we, as project managers, took a community psychological perspective on the dynamics of project development and implementation (Duggan and Kagan, (2007). One of the things that emerged at a meta level from all the projects was the need for awareness raising – of professionals, students, community residents – about the antecedents and consequences of fractures in community cohesion as well as quality of life and wellbeing in areas of urban regeneration. The furtherance of critical consciousness, or 'conscientisation' (see Freire and Faundez, 1989) is one of the central strategies of community psychological interventions at MMU (Kagan and Burton, 2001). As they say (p. 11):

Community psychologists can work to develop dialogic relationships, which enable group conscientization and possibilities for change. They must be prepared to share their 'expert' voice and remain open to learning.

Through dialogic practice, the learner assumes the role of knowing subject in dialogue with the educator, so reality is demythologised: those who have been submerged in oppressive social relations begin to understand these relations and the ideology that hides them (Burton and Kagan, 2001).

How best to achieve critical consciousness is one of the dilemmas facing community psychologists and a number of strategies have been advanced, including those based on creativity and games of different sorts.

Games as a process for the development of critical consciousness.

Simulations and games have been used in training and development activities in a number of different arenas, including the development of interpersonal skills, youth work and community development, policy development. They are an important means of not only raising self and group awareness but also of

developing skills and vary in terms of their duration and active involvement (see Saunders and Severn, 1999). Large scale simulations employ role play and scenario building to enable participants to become involved and learn through doing and experiencing. Similarly, experiential learning techniques encourage, through different means, the integration of experience with learning. Board games and small group games do not involve role play and are not meant to mimic the real world. They do, instead, use culturally familiar formats to pose questions and identify issues of importance as well as encourage discussion and the identification of strategies for change. Eisenack (2006) identifies a number of factors contributing to the effectiveness of board games that are well facilitated, including enhanced motivation, increased interest, opening up dynamic participation, lessening resistance to accepting novel ideas and supporting group discussion. Although there is less evidence for this, he also suggests they can be useful for enhancing declarative knowledge, and are particularly useful for interdisciplinary learning.

We were interested in seeing if we could develop some board games to encourage reflection, discussion, knowledge and emotional learning about issues to do with urban regeneration, community cohesion and inequality of opportunity – themes arising from the community engagement projects.

We were also interested in testing out the extent to which these board games might have relevance beyond England, where they originated, and if it were possible to devise games of international relevance.

The games

We facilitated an innovation session wherein each participant could experience two different games. Three games were used in total.

Building Social Capital, Community Cohesion and Health

This game follows a route around a board familiar to players of monopoly. However property is not traded: social capital credits are. All participants in the workshop played this game. The game aimed to address knowledge and understanding, values, insight into stakeholder perspectives and conflicts and contradictions in social policies.

Community Psychological Solutions to Problems

This game was based on simple matching card games, wherein players identified community psychological solutions to real life dilemmas and

discussed their relevance. Half the participants played this game. The game aimed to address knowledge and understanding, values, insight into stakeholder perspectives, and problem solving.

Moving Towards Cohesive Communities

This game was also a card game wherein explanations for the events presented in different real life scenarios were scored for their appropriateness, following group discussion. Half the participants played this game. The game aimed to address knowledge and understanding, attitudes and values, and problem solving.

Each game gave opportunities for discussion and manipulated ‘scoring’ and winning’ in order to highlight the ease with which progressive stances can be distorted. Each game was accompanied by a set of ‘rules’ and discussion points addressing community psychological themes, although the workshop was not long enough for these to be fully explored.

Feedback from workshop participants

Participants came from a number of different countries, covering each continent. They were invited to complete written feedback and to give the facilitators verbal feedback as well.

Overall, participants enjoyed the session, which stimulated interaction, although over time the intensity of engagement changed.

This session was great – congratulations. (Portugal)

Great interaction from the social capital game.

Very interesting and focused game. Thank you for the good time (Italy)

It was stimulating to explore causes and find solutions. Noise levels were high and the game got more intense in the middle. (Germany, England, Portugal, USA)

Some found the experiences stimulating ideas and reflection at different levels:

I found the game with E-cards and solutions stimulating because it invited to bring in several solutions at different stages and levels of the problem. (Norway)

Encourages discussion and reflection – makes you think outside the box. (Germany, England, Portugal, USA)

They were thought to be less useful for those already working together on an issue, but good for general use:

I thought the games were great for stimulating reflection and conversation. But I thought they were a little too general for people that are already working on a topic or a group that has been working together solving some particular issue. ... However these are great for students and professionals that want to reflect and discuss about such broad topics. (Chile)

Participants adapted the games as they played them, introducing additional complexity.

We used the teams to come up with their own solutions when we found that solutions offered were not ‘adequate’ enough.

Some participants did not like some of the features, particularly of the one in which social capital could be gained (sometimes at other people’s expense)

Not fair to gain social capital if someone else gives it up. We should have been able to gain more credits for better explorations (Germany, Portugal, England, USA)

This might illustrate the limits to which a game can be stretched to fit real world experiences, although could point to some amendments needed. The impact of the games depended in part on their timing and group dynamics.

Interesting games. The one like Monopoly (the Beans game) – better to start with a group because if it’s more similar to traditional games. (Italy)

Experiences of the games reflected the dynamics of the group – some groups changed rules. They also raised issues of competition and cooperation. (Germany, England, Portugal, USA)

How might they be improved?

Perhaps some more detailed instructions for how the experience/solution game worked. (Portugal)

Maintain some flexibility in the games’ rules. (Chile, Portugal)

I would like to know a little bit more about the principles behind the objectives of the games. I think if you put it in the instructions cards it would help more to access to the objectives because I think people playing take too much time in trying to understand why you put in these rules. Since the target population is

professionals and activists, it can be done. (Mexico)

Process (Experiences/solutions) games is difficult to follow. Content is good but hard to know what we are trying to do. (Australia)

Solutions game: encourage people to discuss a solution each and then decide the best one, or how different solutions might be interwoven? (Australia)

You could use pictures or symbols on the cards. (Norway)

Very time-focused – in place and time. May date quickly? (Australia)

I think that it would be a good idea to make them about some specific topics as well – e.g. education, health (like the board game), adolescence, elderly, neighbourhoods and so on. (Chile)

Follow on – some participants offered further support in developing the games in anticipation of their utility.

If you need any help to think about how to make them a little more generic for other countries and realities, I would be more than glad to help (Chile)

I would like to buy the games.. and I would like to try in Mexico the one about solutions. (Mexico)

Discussion

The experiences, then of a workshop made up of participants from different countries and with different experiences within community practice and with community psychological ideas was encouraging. The games did, indeed offer interest, and stimulation and provide conditions for interaction, fun and reflection.

The extent to which they increased declarative knowledge or influenced values and attitudes was less clear, but this is not surprising, given the nature of the participants. It did seem as if participants gained in understanding the perspectives of different stakeholders, and that the complexity of understanding social dilemmas and of problem solving from a community psychological stance was examined. Thus the potential of the games for raising awareness and understanding was suggested. Further work will now be carried out to refine the games for use with students and with community residents and professionals beyond community psychology.

Giroux (1981:118), in the context of radical pedagogy in schools, argues that the concept of the dialectic could be useful insofar as it

links critical reasoning with a critical intervention in the world; is a process of critique and praxis that under different historical conditions takes different forms; necessitates human agents acting collectively to transform the world in which they live; links historical and critical sensibilities as modes of reasoning that inform and enrich each other; not value free but rests on interests that opposes oppression in all its forms.

This perspective resonates with the aspirations of community psychology and the games clearly make a contribution towards such a position.

Reflection is the core to critical praxis as has been argued elsewhere (Kagan, 2007). Freire (1972:131) in an early work suggested that real criticality arises from praxis:

that is if their action encompasses a critical reflection which increasingly organises their thinking and thus leads them to move from a purely naive knowledge of reality to a higher level, one which enables them to perceive the causes of reality.

It is possible that the games help people move towards this kind of criticality, although there are different degrees of reflectivity. Yip (2006:398) identifies four levels of reflective practice:

- Level 0 – absence of reflectivity
- Level 1: basic practical reflectivity in which the worker begins to be conscious of his or her performance in the process of intervention;
- Level 2: Reflectivity in action where the worker begins to be conscious of his or her performance in the process of intervention;
- Level 3: Critical practical reflectivity in which {there is} a highly multidimensional, critical interact[ion] [between the] worker's own beliefs and background [and that of the] client's own needs and background.

Bristow builds on this scheme to suggest a distinction between “practical” and “political” reflectivity, wherein critical political reflectivity is required for conscientisation, and critical practical reflectivity for perspective transformation. It is too early to say whether or not the games contribute to both conscientisation and perspective transformation, but the potential is clearly there. Perhaps the most useful

dynamic within the games is that of awareness through interaction rather than through information giving. Leonard (1975:59) puts this well:

..radical change can only come from consciousness developed as a result of exchange rather than imposition .

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