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Learning Our Way Out: A Model of Program Planning for Changing Times

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Abstract: *This paper describes a community based planning project that led to the identification of a learning model of adult education program planning. The paper identifies the model, locates it within the program planning literature, and suggests implications and limitations for practice.*

The art and science of program planning is buffeted by a host of new realities and a cacophony of ideological and theoretical voices. Although adult educators have responded to these changes by planning and implementing lifelong learning programs in a wide variety of contexts, typical program models struggle to address the type of learning that equips people to navigate their way into an uncertain future. Program planning models in adult education have undergone comparatively little change for decades. Sork (2000) underscored the limitations of traditional technical rational approaches for addressing today's complex societal issues. What practitioners need is a fundamentally different model of program planning that, while building on past models, addresses the uncertainty of today's turbulent environment.

The purpose of this paper is to extend the theory and practice of programming in adult education by identifying a heuristic model that foregrounds the primacy of learning in contrast to the majority of models that foreground teaching or instruction. Existing models promote a more static model of programming knowledge that is inadequate for addressing the learning challenges of an increasingly global, complex and rapidly changing society. In this paper, we describe the research experience of the authors which first suggested this approach, locate that experience within the practice of adult education program planning, and identify implications of the learning approach for adult education theory and practice. Names are pseudonyms.

Background

In August 1992, we visited a rural county in a Southern state at the request of an emerging not-for-profit community based organization called the New Century Council (NCC). The NCC had been working for two years on its mission to work through public/private partnerships to stimulate economic development, increase workplace literacy, and build an information technology infrastructure in their rural community that had a consistent 17% unemployment rate. During the visit we learned about their work and problems they had identified. Although arguably there were multiple problems the one they underscored was what they called "outsiders" telling them what to do. They cited a series of actions by organizations such as state agencies, post-secondary educational institutions, not-for-profit educational organizations, and private consultants that included the selection of a basic skills curriculum, the design of a technology center, and demands made on local businesses to support educational programs. They told stories of being surprised by the details of working arrangements, not being consulted in the planning, and overwhelmed by massive amounts of detail in program presentations, and pressure to go along with decisions. This led to frustration, confusion, conflict, and greater community apathy than before the project—the opposite of their vision in beginning their work.

At that time we were both graduate students and had a modest educational consulting practice. We were visiting the county to talk with the head of the Council as a part of our graduate work and were simply there at the right time, and were asked what we would

recommend. Not knowing what to do, but also steeped in the efforts of those working to develop learning organizations (Senge, 1990), community based learning models (Horton and Freire, 1990), participatory evaluation (Patton, 1990), and action research (McTaggart, 1991), and anticipating elements of what later would be called communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), we suggested that they gather the stakeholders and together to figure out what kind of a program the community needed. Employing a form of community based action research (Stringer, 1996), we worked with a broad cross section of community leadership including elected officials, educators, administrators, business leaders, employees, welfare recipients, and representatives from state and regional agencies. Our assumption was that community members could find answers as they learned together, relying on their own knowledge as well as that of others.

The action research process involved a series of meetings where participant stakeholders, including both providers and recipients of services, worked together to identify problems, locate resources, and make plans for the future of their community. They identified the need for information so they could make more informed decisions. We had developed a contextually based listening process, the Organizational Learning System Analysis (Davis & Ziegler, 1995), which they decided to use. Working with community partners, we conducted the listening process in nine businesses, two public sector organizations, and four educational institutions. More than 650 participants were involved in this year-long collaborative inquiry. Throughout there were meetings by stakeholders to analyze the growing body of data and communicate emerging findings to the wider community. Various methods were used during the year-long process to gain widespread feedback and seek validation for emerging plans and ideas.

In the end the community did develop a comprehensive learning program, but they also developed something else-- a way to plan and work together that continues today. Since this study we have used a similar process in large-scale community development, a participatory church re-development project, the development and implementation of a state-wide public sector institutional culture change initiative, and the development of a learning program for a large private sector manufacturing company. Each of these situations shared commonalities: those involved perceived themselves to be involved in a time of rapid change, expert knowledge was useful but insufficient, outcomes were unpredictable, multiple stakeholders intentionally participated and co-constructed knowledge over time, processes were transparent and communicated regularly to all stakeholders, and fundamental changes occurred in behavior, knowledge, skills and attitudes of those involved in the program as well as in the educational program they designed. These commonalities formed the foundation of what we later called the learning model of program planning.

Program Planning in Adult Education

As we examined our experience in the context of adult education program planning literature we realized that none of the models fit our experience. In most of the planning literature, theorists view planning as an activity that precedes and is separate from the program. This distinction is artificial and promotes the illusion that a program planner is *the* expert in charge of the content and in control of the process. In this paper, program and program planning are used synonymously because the program does not exist apart from its development, which is ongoing. Traditionally, adult education confuses program with curriculum (Apps 1979). Program has been used to describe educational activities in multiple contexts with such diversity as a General Equivalency Diploma (GED) class, organizational consultation, a church bible class, participatory education for social action, professional development, and higher education.

According to Apps (1979), a program is “a plan or system under which action may be taken toward a goal” (p. 114). Boone (1992) is more specific, defining a planned program as “the master perspective (plan) for behavioral change toward which adult educators direct their efforts” (p. 16).

In adult education, program planning can be distinguished in a variety of ways. We cluster the planning literature into a descriptive typology that includes four types of models: production, consulting, systems, and learning. The production model is technical-rational and linear, consisting of sequential steps that planners carry out in a deductive and prescriptive manner to produce a measurable outcome. Central to this model is Tyler’s (1951) seminal theory of curriculum development. The Tylerian approach to programming undergirds most practice in adult education (Sork & Buskey, 1986) and continues to exert a powerful influence.

Partly as a response to the perceived inability of more production oriented program planning models to address the complexities of human interaction, the consulting model emphasizes communication and draws from applied psychological theory, especially the work of Lewin (Lippitt & Lippitt, 1978). Like the production oriented approach to program planning, the consulting approach is linear; however, it emphasizes human interaction instead of behavior.

Systems have direct relevance for planning educational programs; however, conceiving programs as systems is less common in adult education. A notable exception is the work of Boone (1992; Boone, Safrit & Jones, 2002), who builds on the structural-functional approach to the social systems theory of Loomis, and ultimately upon the work of Parsons (1951). For Loomis (1960) a social system is a "functioning entity or whole, composed of interrelated parts or elements" that interact through "a pattern of... mutually oriented... structured and shared symbols" (p. 4). Many programs in adult education function in ways similar to what Loomis terms informal social systems where the educational program itself is but one system within numerous external systems that interact and affect each other.

Models such as those proposed by Boone (1992), Sork (2000), Cafarella (2002), and Cervero and Wilson (1994; 2001) incorporate elements of the production oriented, consulting, and systems models of program planning. The systems model of adult education programs has made significant contributions to understanding the relationship between programs and their environments. However, most current models have not taken systems thinking far enough. While espousing broad participation in the process of developing programs, most assume the role of a program planner who serves as the expert in the planning process, with the almost certain result that other critical voices will be diminished or absent. Although theorists state a desire to respond to the changing needs of society, in practice they deny the probability of change because they rely on content that is known. When content is unknown, measurable objectives cannot be developed, and in fact, objectives must remain fluid. Relying too heavily on the known, most models fail to address the increasingly unknown dimensions planners often encounter. Learning is a rubric that addresses the unknown and suggests a new model of adult education program planning. A model underscoring the importance of learning reflects our experience with the NCC as well as that of other organizations that want to design effective educational programs that address today’s shifting and complex issues.

Merriam and Clark (1993) define learning as “attending to and reflecting on an experience which results in some present or future change in one’s behavior, knowledge, attitude, beliefs or skills” (p. 131). Learning is an increasingly important topic in leadership studies (Heifetz, 1994), organizational change (Bergquist, 1993), educational reform (Fullan, 2001), organizational learning (Easterby-Smith, Burgoyne & Araujo, 1999), and the learning

organization (Senge, 1990; Pedler, Burgoyne, & Burdell, 1991; Watkins & Marsick, 1993). Although adult education programs have long focused on learning, in many cases the learning is primarily for program participants, or takes place during the evaluation process, and is rarely extended to the planning process itself, at least in a significant way.

When the NCC invited us to help plan a program for their community, we were facing a situation where we had as much need to learn in the planning of a program as anyone who might participate in those learning programs. A model of educational program planning based on learning differs from the systems model in several critical respects. The learning model is heuristic. No matter what is already known in the planning process, this model assumes that changing contexts require ongoing learning. Since learning is multi-dimensional, it can include technical rational elements found in production oriented models as well as interactive dimensions that are prominent in consultative models. Because learning is systemic, all stakeholders participate in learning and building knowledge. Making all steps of the process transparent through documentation, reflection, and communication to all stakeholders supports inclusiveness and learning. Programming in the learning approach requires a major shift in perception from a focus on the individual to a vision of a dynamic and fluid community of practice (Wenger, 1998), a primacy of the whole where language is used to generate new meaning in practice.

In the learning model stakeholders, an inextricable part of the environment, interact with one another and in the process, engage in learning. Through this interaction programs are enacted (Maturana & Varela, 1980; 1987) by praxis--purposeful, reflective awareness in the context of collaborative activity. In the learning model, phrases like "we make the road by walking" (Horton & Freire, 1990) and "learning our way out" (Finger & Asun, 2001) become operational. When learning is foregrounded in the planning process, other elements are enacted differently. In the NCC project, we found that viewing the entire program planning process as a learning process facilitated increased stakeholder engagement, and resulted in a much higher tolerance for ambiguity. Because the literature of program planning was inadequate to guide us in developing learning programs when outcomes were uncertain, we developed the learning model, grounded in practice, through a process of reflection with participants and colleagues in order to address a need in our consulting practice. This model may represent an extension of adult education program planning theory even as it raises questions about the lack of attention paid to learning in other models.

Implications of the Learning Model for Practice

Assessing of the effectiveness of a learning model of program planning is challenging because the model does not assume an objectivist epistemology. Each application is unique and specific comparisons between them are impossible. The assessment of effectiveness is limited to stakeholder reports of perceived changes. In the case of the NCC, a high level of involvement led to significant stakeholder buy-in and engagement in programming efforts. While participants reported that their experience was positive and led to valuable outcomes, additional research is needed to better understand the process. The learning model is especially appropriate for turbulent and chaotic environments where answers are not clear and relationships are changing. As with other interactive planning models, the strengths of the learning model include its adaptability and sensitivity to a changing environment (Adams 1991). The learning model is "environment driven," and focused on its context. Where programs are primarily "mission driven," such as those focused on literacy, or "product driven," where the use of a specific curriculum is mandated, the learning model would be more challenging to implement. To the

degree that the learning needs are perceived to be known and focused on specific instrumental skills, there would be less incentive to use the learning model. In the rapidly changing environment of the twenty-first century, however, even program planning that is primarily driven by organizational mission, product, or functional skills is subject to a high degree of uncertainty and modification, making aspects of a model based on learning more applicable.

As with all planning models, the learning model of program planning has limitations. Despite its heuristic emphasis on learning, in the final analysis all learning is a process with hegemonic boundaries and assumptions. Yet the boundaries and assumptions involved in the learning model are different. Boundaries are more transparent, planners are more appreciative of culture and participative engagement, and programs are more responsive to changing environments.

A learning model of program planning has its own limitations, one of which is the limitations of the learning process itself. Even in the NCC case described, with its high level of community participation, and significant collaboration and reflection, not all organizations participated. There was competition especially among educational institutions. The project also exposed the fragile ecosystem of learning and employment as the community realized that raising the level of educational achievement also had unintended consequences, as when citizens who increased their skills moved to metropolitan areas to get better jobs. In addition, although sympathetic and appreciative of the local culture, as researchers and facilitators we were outsiders, and although not directive in our interactions, we did influence the project with our assumptions. The bottom line however was that as researchers we learned, as did most participants in the community. The program planning process was as much of a learning experience as the program that was planned was intended to be. As a result, the educational perspectives and practices of the community changed. Although the community has since lost three manufacturing plants and unemployment is still high, the partnership is still working together effectively, as participants work together to learn new ways to strengthen their community through adult learning.

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