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Citizens Developing a Voice at the Table: A Story of Educational Organizing in Contemporary Extension Work

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Citizens Developing a Voice at the Table: A Story of Educational Organizing in Contemporary Extension Work

Abstract

Diffusing and helping people to apply "science-based" information have long been viewed as the core tasks of Extension educators and specialists. But Extension work also includes a tradition of educational organizing that develops leadership, builds civic capacity, and facilitates learning through bringing people and resources together to identify, deliberate about, and act on important public issues and problems. This article draws from a "practice story" in contemporary Extension work in order to shed light on the dimensions and significance of educational organizing in today's world.

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Introduction

The essence of Extension education is often understood as consisting of two kinds of work: diffusing "science-based" information and helping people "apply" such information. While this captures some of what Extension educators have done and still do, from the very beginning Extension work has also included something I call "educational organizing" (Peters, 2002). Educational organizing can be understood as the work of developing leadership, building civic capacity, and facilitating learning through bringing people and resources together to identify, deliberate about, and act on important public issues and problems. Such work helps people to learn and act together in relation to specific, real-world problems and issues they care about, over time scales that can stretch from several months to several years in length.

At present, there is little useful research on the tradition of educational organizing in Extension work, either with respect to its historical foundations and development or its current shape and form. In response, I have initiated an action research project designed to help educators, specialists, and administrators to both understand and strengthen this tradition of work.

The focus of the research is the development of "practitioner profiles" that provide detailed first-person accounts of actual "practice stories" of educational organizing from experienced Extension professionals. My research method is adapted from an approach developed by John Forester that aims "to take practice more seriously, to recognize sensitively and to analyze powerfully what insightful practitioners do well in the most challenging moments of their work" (Forester, 1999, p. 8).

In semi-structured, tape-recorded interviews, which generally last from an hour to an hour and a half, Extension educators are asked to speak about one particular project they have pursued in a way that provides insight into what they actually do in their work. Each profile, created from the edited transcript of an interview, tells the story of a project in the educator's own words. Completed profiles provide accounts of specific practice stories, shedding light not only on the challenges educators face but what they do as they respond to them.

Profiles serve as learning and theory-building tools that help us identify and critically reflect on the skills, strategies, and roles educators use, develop, and play in their everyday practice. Because profiles are constructed from the actual lived experiences of practitioners, they can help us theorize about Extension education in ways that have strong practical utility.

To date, my graduate students at Cornell University and I have developed about 60 practitioner profiles of Extension educators and specialists from several states. In this article, I draw from one particularly rich profile from our collection in order to discuss some of what we are learning about the dimensions and significance of educational organizing in contemporary Extension work. The profile is of Janet Ayres, a professor and Extension specialist in leadership development in the Department of Agriculture Economics at Purdue University. Her "practice story" describes a process of public deliberation and leadership development that she coached and facilitated to help citizens in Wabash Township (near Lafayette, Indiana) gain a voice in development decisions affecting their community.

The Practice Story

Janet's story, in her words, is about "how people in a community were having decisions made about their quality of life. They had no representation on [local] decision making boards and wanted to have a say in what was happening. If I were to give it a title, it would be something about citizens developing a voice at the table." (This excerpt, and those that follow, from Peters, Hittleman, & Ayres, 2001) The story began in 1994 when a township trustee asked Scott Rumble, an Extension educator in Tippecanoe County, Indiana, for help. Scott then called Janet to ask for her help.

The first thing Janet and Scott did was to arrange a meeting with the trustee to learn more about the trustee's situation and perspective. Their "work" at this meeting was to draw out the trustee's concerns and listen carefully to what she said. Here is how Janet described what they did:

The Extension educator and I asked her a lot of questions about what she thought was going on, about the interest level of other people, about any form of organized group of citizens that currently existed. Other than the volunteer fire department, there was no organized group, and that was one of the issues. We asked her these questions to get a better feel for what was going on and also her level of interest in involving others in a process.

Based on what they heard, Janet and Scott had to decide whether it made sense for them to get involved. They asked themselves whether what they heard from the trustee was only a "personal agenda," or whether it was "truly a public issue where education and bringing the people together would make a difference." They could not answer this question without taking another important step: explaining the role they could play and suggesting a process to get things started. As Janet recalls,

We told her that our role is education. We're not private consultants, and we do not make recommendations. We will bring people together and create an opportunity for citizens--and we do use that word, citizens--to come together to talk about issues and to help them look at alternative courses of action and to facilitate a process where they can develop their own plan of action. But we do not do it for the people; we facilitate. Through that, we can provide education, and we can tap into the resources of the university to the extent that expertise may be needed. We would not be making any decisions, and we would not be making any recommendations, but we would provide a process whereby they would do that. That was exactly what she wanted. So with that, we felt there was a reason for us to get involved and that we could do some meaningful work through education and organization.

Janet and Scott's next step was to help the trustee begin to organize around her concerns and settle on a process for taking action. Here, Janet continued her listening and drawing out work with the larger group the trustee brought together, while also helping them to settle on a process for taking action. In her words,

We asked [the trustee] to identify other people that she knew who would broadly represent the township--I guess you would call it a steering committee--to help get this process under way. She identified nine to ten people and asked whether they would they be willing to meet with us. Then we met, in a home, sitting around the living room talking about the issues and what they saw happening there, and what they thought needed to be done...[W]e talked about a process that we might go through to bring people together across the township. We spent a lot of time talking about the process.

The process the steering committee settled on was adapted from the "Take Charge" program, which Janet had previously designed and used with other groups. Take Charge is an approach that is grounded in three sequential public meetings that move people through a process of identifying the strengths and weaknesses of their community, developing a vision of the future, and deciding on issues that need to be addressed to move toward their vision. After deciding to use this approach, the steering committee gathered data on the households in the township, built a relationship with the local media, and worked on logistical issues related to holding the three public meetings (where to hold them, for example).

From this point on in the story, Janet played two main roles. She *coached* the steering committee as it moved through the Take Charge process, and she *facilitated* the three public meetings they organized. Janet summarized these roles this way:

[After] we identify a steering committee to give leadership to the process, our role becomes more one of coaching the process and facilitating the meetings to ensure the meetings are fair and that they're open and accessible and meaningful. In this case, I coached the process by working very, very closely with the steering committee. I met with them a lot so that they understood the process. We met two to three times before the three meetings started. Then after each meeting, we met. We started on a Thursday, so it was three Thursdays in a row. Then after the third meeting, we met several times to talk about what came out of the meetings and what the next steps ought to be, how to keep communication going.

Through her facilitation role at the three public meetings, Janet continued her listening and drawing out work. As she put it, "Part of my job is to hear what they're saying and to hear the common themes and the common threads. At the end of the meeting, I would summarize what I heard as the common threads." She also worked hard to make sure those who attended the meetings did not just stick with "people of their own kind," but instead got a chance to get to know, and eventually work with, people who were different. As she told me, this was intentional:

At the first meeting, people will sit by people they're most comfortable with, people of their own kind. This is where I think facilitating a meeting is very important. We mixed them up from the very beginning, so they would sit with people that they didn't know and could hear about the community from a different perspective, so that the cardiologist who drives his Mercedes could hear a lower-income person talk about the inaccessibility of the community services. As I facilitate, I'm very open about what I'm doing. I don't facilitate in a hidden way. I tell them up front that we have mixed them because when we come into a room like this, we're all a little anxious; we don't know quite what to expect, and we're going to sit by people that we feel most comfortable with. And I tell them that I'm going to be stretching them a little bit beyond their comfort zone and would really like for them to sit where we've assigned them because they are friends and neighbors, and we want them to get acquainted and to listen to what others feel are issues in the community.

Something else Janet did that she counted as significant, not only for her facilitation role but for her coaching role as well, was to suggest alternative approaches to problem solving. This was particularly important here, because some people started with the idea that the "solution" to their problem of being shut out of decision-making tables was to hire a lawyer and file a lawsuit. But Janet wanted people to look for other solutions. As she put it,

I think one of our roles as Extension educators can be to suggest alternative approaches to problem solving other than hiring an attorney and having an attorney fight it for you, which seems to be a very common mind-set. Maybe that's just in Indiana. I see so much that if a person has an issue, they try to find allies who also support that issue. Then they hire an attorney to fight their battle for them so they win, rather than seeing that "We're in a community together. We all have a stake here. Let's talk about this and work it out together around a table." That model is forgotten or not thought about. I talk about it, and then people say, "Oh, I like that." But they hadn't thought about it.

The three public meetings Janet facilitated were quite successful. They were lively and well attended. Agreement was reached on six priority issues to work on (e.g., the effects of growth on the school system), and a volunteer task force was created for each. The steering committee organized monthly educational meetings about the issues during the time the task forces were doing their work. During this time, Janet continued her coaching role. She added to this two other roles: linking the group with experts at Purdue University who could help people better understand the six priority issues and conducting skills workshops for the key leaders who emerged from the process. Here she describes these roles:

[The steering committee] set up a series of educational meetings. We provided input into those and brought experts from Purdue who could talk about that. But they set them up and they were in charge of the meeting. We took an approach that would enable the greatest input from people and would bring to the top the issues of the people. Altogether, probably over 240 people were involved in the whole thing....I met with the chairperson of [the] groups and did a leadership training workshop on what it means to be a chair of a group, what's expected, how you work through this process. We developed a time-line so that each of them was very clear about what was expected of them and how they were to go about doing their work. We were all in agreement on a time-line. Then those task forces did their work. They gathered information. They studied the issues. And they developed a plan of action with a set of recommendations for what they thought they needed to be done.

The recommendations were put together in a report that was published and shared not only with local decision-makers, but also with every household in the county. After that, the process of implementation began, which was still underway when I interviewed Janet in June of 2001.

Janet's story can be viewed as a success story, at least with respect to helping people in Wabash Township to organize to effectively deal with their original problem of feeling shut out of the decision making process. The citizens of Wabash Township did, in the end, develop a voice at the table--many voices at many tables, in fact.

Discussion

We can learn a great deal about educational organizing from Janet's practice story. Here, I only have space to briefly discuss three things. First, Janet's story helps us learn something about the breadth of roles such work involves as it unfolds over time. From the account of Janet's practice story provided above, we can see that she played seven different roles as the work progressed:

1. Drawing out and listening carefully to people's ideas and views;
2. Providing process suggestions;
3. Facilitating;
4. Coaching;
5. Providing alternative approaches to problem solving;
6. Providing workshops of specific skills; and
7. Linking people with university resources.

But we learn more from Janet's profile than just what roles she played. We learn something about how she played them as well. For example, we learn that when Janet is "facilitating," she is intentionally working to get people from different backgrounds to listen to and learn from each other.

Second, a careful reading of Janet's profile helps us see that educational organizing demands more than subject matter expertise and a technical competence in the seven roles named above. It also demands an embrace of--and an ability to model or live out--a set of principles and values that serve to guide or ground technical skills and knowledge. In Janet's case, we learn from reading her entire profile that these include:

- A deeply felt respect for all kinds of people,
- Faith and confidence in their capacities and potential,
- A passionate commitment to broadening and deepening the level and quality of their participation in civic life, and
- A strong belief in active democracy.

Interestingly, while Janet has three degrees from two land-grant universities (Purdue and Cornell), she did not learn these things in her formal education. She learned them from watching and listening to her father, a dairy farmer who was deeply involved in community affairs.

Finally, Janet's profile helps us to see both how and what people can learn as a result of educational organizing. To see this, we must begin with Janet's definition of education. According to Janet,

It's a two-way street of someone from the university in a facilitating role learning about the community along with the citizens, as they are learning from one another. It's people educating one another about the community. It's not just transferring the expertise. Education, to me, comes with a discourse. It comes with a much deeper understanding of issues. You get in community, where you're talking with people who have very different views. You keep talking and keep talking until everyone around the table has felt the light bulb go on because "Now I'm looking at this issue differently than just in my own little narrow slice of the world." That, to me, is the highest level of education. . . . [A]nd it stretches us. I think it stretches you to learn tolerance of listening to people who have very different values, or of different political persuasions, and to listen to that and think about it. To me, that's when you're getting the butterflies in the tummy and the sweaty armpits because it's stretching you.

As an Extension specialist grounded in this view of education, Janet helped community members learn much more than a set of technical skills. She did help them learn important concrete skills, such as how to chair a task force, how to work with the media, how to do research on community issues, how to write a vision statement, and how to develop action plans. But she also helped them learn how others in their community--particularly those from different neighborhoods or different socioeconomic circumstances--viewed things.

Through Janet's artful facilitation work, they learned to hear each other's thoughts and concerns, and to understand each other's hopes and interests. They learned "tolerance and respect." They learned to move from thinking in terms of "I, me, mine" to "we." They learned to shift from seeing people with different views as "enemies" and "opponents" to seeing them as potential collaborators.

Additionally, people not only learned that it is possible to work together, they developed a new frame of reference for *how* to work together. As Janet told me, they began to see themselves as collaborative problem-solvers. People who did not see themselves as having power began to

discover that they could, in fact, act together to change the world. And what they learned in this specific experience, in Janet's view, could be applied to other cases in the future:

I'm hoping that people learn a process and a way of working together, that regardless of the issue, they've learned how to talk about public issues with civility and how to work them through any problem-solving model. So it's not just the issue that we were talking about five years ago, but they can apply that process to an issue today and five years down the road. I also hope they recognize that there are other approaches besides building allies, forming a special interest group, and fighting. There's a better way through collaboration.

Learning from Practice Stories

The above discussion only begins to scratch the surface of what can be learned from Janet's story. There are many more lessons and insights to be found in her story than I have space to draw out. Additionally, there are many questions her story leads us to raise about a host of things, ranging from the immediately practical (e.g., how do we deal with the challenges of local politics in Extension work?) to the deeply philosophical (e.g., what is the relationship between education and democracy?).

While rich practice stories like the one Janet tells can be invaluable tools for research aimed at building theory about practice, I am finding in my own work that they can also serve as powerful learning tools in classroom, staff development, and organizational development settings. Such stories not only help us learn "how to do it," but also just what the "it" is, and why it matters.

In other words, while practice stories help us learn tips and strategies useful for improving the technical practice of educational organizing, they also help us learn something about its value and significance, both in relation to people in communities across the nation who are struggling to address public problems and to the Extension system itself, which is struggling to develop a clear, vital, and compelling sense of purpose and relevance in a new time.

These days, change and revitalization efforts in the Extension system frequently come with calls to "think outside the box." As important and useful as that might be, perhaps we need to think more deeply and critically about what is in the box, too. Perhaps if we do so we will discover that the seeds of revitalization are already emerging from within, in the practice of educators like Janet Ayres. Perhaps we will discover in their work the continuing relevance and power of one of Extension's best historical traditions. And perhaps we will find inspiration and hope for the difficult but essential work of renewing it in our time.

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