

LEARNING COMMUNITIES AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: DESCRIBING THE PROCESS

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Introduction

It is human nature for individuals to interact, discuss, share information or 'meaning' and learn from each other (MacKeracher 1996). Survival skills have been passed on to the next generation by trial and error, observation and teaching family members and groups how to live in hostile environments (Mead 1959). Historically, societies that did the best job at teaching and training their members were the ones that survived and preserved their cultural heritage for future generations. In other words, individuals and groups are their own source for learning about how the world works.

Risk takers, explorers and others dared to be different by challenging both the known and unknown. However, they became known for the knowledge they were able to share and the skills they passed on to others who wanted to explore new frontiers. Therefore, it should not be considered strange or unusual that learning is a normal and natural phenomenon that has been used as a tool for both survival and for improving situations and conditions in communities (Hart 1983; Kegan 1982).

Business organisations, industries and communities are finding themselves operating in a global market place rather than in local or statewide markets of years past (Kanter 1995). Several options have been proposed to meet these global marketing demands such as total quality management (Deming 1991), re-engineering corporations (Hammer & Champy 1993), and proposing performance standards (Swanson 1994).

To compete on a global level, corporations have had to adopt a variety of competitive strategies. For example, the idea of products with zero defects and high quality has been promoted by Deming's idea of total quality management (1991). To accomplish some of these drastic changes, the idea of re-engineering (Hammer & Champy 1993) emerged as a way of emphasising that achieving total quality is not a minor adjustment to the organisation, but it is a total re-organising and re-shaping of the organisation (their notion of 're-engineering'). If an organisation is going to adopt quality processes and reshape the production process, then how will plant managers know they have succeeded? One way is to adopt performance standards as suggested by Swanson (1994). Having standards for quality, for reshaping the organisation, and for production, will assist managers and workers in knowing they are on the right track. All of these processes and procedures require some knowledge of current and future operations of their organisation.

To get from the current situation to the future, or desired state, requires learning about quality (e.g., no defects), how to restructure operations (e.g., re-engineering), and what is required to meet these levels of performance (e.g., performance standards). In

the past ten years the idea of the learning organisation emerged which suggests that all members of business, industry and community can contribute something to the knowledge and skill base of the larger group.

Senge (1990), Senge et al. (1994), Watkins and Marsick (1993), and others, have promoted the idea of learning organisations as a way of capitalising on the knowledge, talents, and skills of managers and workers in business and industry. Individuals and groups within a corporation organise their work in such a way as to share knowledge and skills that they perform on a daily basis. The combination of actions, reactions, skills and dialoguing of everyday experiences becomes a contribution to the overall learning experience and the knowledge base of the business or industry. Stewart (1997) and Crawford (1991) have described these activities as contributing to the intellectual and human capital of organisations.

Community learning

People also utilise their skills, knowledge and understanding when they are not on the job. Learning takes place everyday, whether at home, volunteering, visiting relatives or relaxing. If someone is employed they are likely to be learning on the job, about the job, as well as learning any new skills that will be needed to do their job in the future. Individuals not employed and seeking jobs are likely to be learning about locating job opportunities, filling out applications and finding other means of economic support. Everyday knowledge, skills for basic survival, and on-the-job learning are all parts of the human capital development that the individual has at his/her disposal and brings to the work place (Stewart 1997).

Individuals and community organisations need networks and normative systems for capturing, processing, and understanding data, information, and knowledge that can then be used for creating application, implementation, and evaluation systems for their community related experiences (Moore & Brooks 1996). These networks and systems are the social capital (Falk & Harrison 1998) of the community. Communities use a variety of methods to capture this information and shared experiences. Communities that have numerous formal and informal information sharing processes, and provide multiple opportunities for group participation and networking, are more likely to benefit from the structuring of social capital.

Freire (1972, 1974) worked with unemployed and underemployed individuals in a variety of situations in which he taught them how to read by discussing aspects of their everyday life. They talked about where they lived and how they worked. They discussed their living conditions relative to those of the land owners and persons in power. They described their work and living conditions in relation to the natural environment. Discussions were directed toward how messages or ideas were delivered in their villages and the larger cities. Freire asked people to discuss their very existence. Observation, experiences, reflections, discussions and dialogue were the curricula for learning about self, family, community, work and societies.

A perspective from the 1990s, the works of Kanter (1995) and Henderson (1996), reflects a sense of how communities must continue to rely on the skills and knowledge of its residents. Communities need the skills and values of residents that have grown up in the community and have a sense of place as well as those of newcomers who move into the community with experiences and perspectives from other places. Newcomers often have skills and technical knowledge that can benefit the community. As a consequence, communities are becoming more diverse. Locals and new residents have a wealth of information, skills, knowledge, and strategies for learning that can be shared and forged into a powerful force for community development. Community problem-solving becomes more challenging and diverse as resources become scarce. Knowledge of creative ways to solve problems may come from locals who want to preserve the unique aspects of their community and from newcomers who may have observed other cultures or groups address a similar situation (Kanter 1995).

In the community-learning approach, community developers may play several roles. First, they may listen to comments and concerns of community members and suggest that a group should come together to share their concerns and knowledge about an issue. During the meeting, or dialogue process, community developers may be again listening for gaps in knowledge and information about the issue. They may suggest resource persons or data bases to secure information for the group. In addition, community developers may assist the group in developing their own information gathering process. Further, the group may need to do some site visits to one or several locations to confirm new knowledge and to gather additional perceptions about the issue. Eventually, the community developer may be asked to assist the group or develop a process for connecting the new knowledge into an action plan. In all of these roles the community developer is assisting the group in learning, in becoming aware of the issue, in identifying various sources of information and data, in discussing, observing and reconstructing the concern or issue, and then in designing strategies for implementation or use of the new knowledge. Watkins and Marsick (1993), Pedler (1991), and Revans (1980) would call this learning in action or action learning.

Learning communities

The theme of the 1997 annual meeting of the Community Development Society was Reflections and Visions on the Learning Community. Several presentations, including Bawden (1997), Falk (1997), Rossouw (1997), and Moore and Brooks (1997) emphasised recent research about learning communities and their characteristics. Bawden (1997) posed an integrated critical learning systems model to describe 'social learning' in communities. Falk (1997) depicted that we have yet to create an adequate conceptualisation of learning communities while Rossouw (1997) offered an approach or schema for evaluating activities of community developers as they work towards organising learning communities. Moore and Brooks (1997) suggested ideas about features, characteristics, techniques and barriers to creating and maintaining learning communities.

Specifically, Moore and Brooks (1996), co-directors of a community-learning program since 1991, have experience working with 29 communities in two states. The effort has been designed to establish groups and teams in communities that organise themselves into community-learning organisations. They meet regularly, learn about their issues or concerns, and develop and implement action plans that achieve their particular goals. The program was designed in 1990 and implemented with the first of several community groups in 1991. Moore and Brooks (1996) conduct an intensive learning experience for community teams which includes a 3-day retreat and follow-up support that may last several years. Participants are expected to conduct community surveys, document success stories, and review projects that did not work prior to the retreat. At the retreat each team presents its members' community information and they are given an opportunity to promote their county, city or neighborhood to others at the retreat. Community teams are asked to incorporate visions for the future, ideas, presentations and resource support suggestions into a community action plan. Action plans are shared with all of the community teams as well as the resource agency representatives attending the meeting. Following the retreat, each community is provided technical assistance in sharing ideas with neighborhood residents and others to generate additional ideas and support for community development.

Action plans resulting from these several retreats, combined with follow-up assistance and observations of community changes, offer unique insights into community-learning organisation practice. In 1993, several small rural telecommunications companies in Georgia participated in this type of community development program. The Governor's Advisory Council has used the basic design of the Community Economic Development Program (CEDP) as the core design for the Georgia Academy for Economic Development. Beginning in 1995, and continuing to date, the Georgia Academy has conducted multi-day experiences for communities in seven out of 11 multi-county regions in the state using the CEDP model.

Community-learning organisations differ from those in business and industry

Watkins and Marsick (1993), Senge (1990), Senge et al. (1994), and others have written extensively about learning organisations, in turn, contributing to the dialogue about learning. However, there must be caution in how the findings from business and industry are applied to communities. Communities are different from business and industry organisations in several important ways.

First, communities are multi-dimensional as a result of the different individuals, groups, and special interests of their residents. Further, the diversity, interests, and goals to be achieved in communities are different from those in business and industry and may focus on basic improvements in daily living conditions. In contrast, the interests or goals of business and industry are most often focused on a specific mission or 'for-profit' bottom line. Second, there are many different leaders, representing very different organisations with many strong voices in communities compared to the individual corporate CEO who promotes a specific vision or goal.

Third, communities may operate with several different communication styles, patterns, and networks whereas corporations tend to promote a style unique to their marketing or product niche. Fourth, communities are generally not organised into departments, divisions, or units and they must share information to learn about their needs and to develop an organisation or structure that meets these objectives. Finally, communities may seek multiple outcomes for their residents including adequate housing, job opportunities, improved services to residents, access to recreation facilities, and neighborhood transportation, to name but a few.

Drawing upon the ideas, experiences and techniques of Senge (1990), Senge et al. (1994), Freire (1972, 1974), Mezirow (1978, 1991), Kanter (1995), Stewart (1997), Vaill (1996), Falk (1997) and Moore and Brooks (1996), there are indications that some general principles of adult learning, group process, problem solving, and decision making are shared by both individuals in the workplace and in the community. These general principles are outlined in the following sections.

Designing learning communities

What is the motivation or need for individuals in communities to share experiences and suggest changing their current living conditions? It may be a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow 1978, 1991), issue, concern, contentious discussion (Freire 1972), or a particular community problem, labeled as an 'ugly baby' by Moore and Brooks (1996). They (Moore & Brooks 1996) make reference to ugly babies as a metaphor for community eyesores and problems which are very often ignored or not discussed and which require special efforts on the part of the community to remedy. The important point here is that *residents, volunteers, community leaders, community developers, and others* sense that something is not operating correctly and that the situation, or 'ugly baby,' needs attention or change. Individuals in the community may suggest meeting face-to-face or in some instances meeting electronically to discuss an issue or concern. This initial meeting or discussion may suggest the need for gathering some additional data and information about the issue or related concerns.

What is described here is a straight line process but in actual operation there is cycling, recycling and restating the issue or concern until all are in agreement that the idea is broad enough or comprehensive enough to express the situation. The group generates some knowledge about the disorienting dilemma or motivating issue as concerns, data, information, experiences and dialogue proceed. Some of this knowledge may be applied to solving the dilemma or actions may be taken to implement a problem-solving strategy. Results of the application or implementation are reviewed, evaluated, and discussed and the group may decide to gather more data about the issue in a cyclic process, often referred to as an action research approach (Argyris 1985, 1993) or the action learning/planning model (Moore & Brooks 1996).

The above description draws upon literature in community organisation, social action, community development, transformative learning, and action research. The application of these processes and theories in practice has produced a viable strategy for the emergence of community groups that learn, act, reflect, learn, act and so on as

they move towards becoming a learning community. Because actions such as responding to community needs and developing ways to problem solve often proceed discussion and documentation, there appears to be a gap in the literature about learning communities.

What is not described about designing learning communities are the activities of identifying issues; getting individuals to discuss these issues; organising themselves into a dialogue or discussion group; and seeking out information and knowledge and then applying this new knowledge to solving community concerns. The following case example is included to provide a context for discussing characteristics and findings related to forming, maintaining, and reviewing the work of a learning community. The Upper Savannah River Economic Coalition (USREC) is one of the programs guided by Moore and Brooks (1996).

Case example

This brief case example describes the issues identification and group formation processes of a specific learning community. Conflicting points of view over resources and community development efforts of one community or state has implications for its neighbours. Jurisdictional boundaries such as county and state borders have a long history of creating real or perceived problems for residents. In other words, community concerns or problems have a tendency to transcend county and state boundaries (Daloz et al. 1996).

The Savannah River, which separates Georgia and South Carolina, has been looked upon as a division between the haves and have-nots depending upon where you live. The authors had heard disparaging comments about community economic development from both sides of the river and suggested that individuals from several counties along the Savannah River meet to discuss their common concerns about economic development activities along the shores of three lakes managed by the US Army Corps of Engineers. A three-day retreat was held with representatives from eight counties (three from South Carolina and five from Georgia) and persons from 16 resource agencies from both states e.g., Regional Development Commissions (RDCs); Utility Company representatives; universities; US Department of Agriculture/Rural Development (USDA); Parks, Recreation and Tourism (PRT) from South Carolina; and Industry, Trade and Tourism (DITT) from Georgia.

The retreat was designed to identify issues and concerns for each of the counties, suggest possible resource strategies from agencies servicing the counties, and to see if there were concerns that were shared among counties and across state boundaries. Two issues emerged from the retreat: 1) all participants wanted to increase the potential of the area to become a tourist destination and, 2) all counties wanted to increase the possibilities of small business start-ups in the area. Since the first retreat, held 4–6 June 1996, there have been regularly scheduled meetings of the Upper Savannah River Economic Coalition (USREC). These have averaged six meetings per year as the group meets to learn about a variety of issues (i.e., scenic by-ways, developing web pages, sharing event and historic site locations) related to their two

specific goals. The mailing list has grown to over 120 participants and a ninth county has joined the group. Notes about discussions and presentations at meetings are prepared by the group facilitator and mailed to all on the list to keep everyone informed and to further encourage participation at meetings.

Meetings are sponsored by a Georgia or South Carolina community on a rotating basis. The group published an events calendar listing meetings, festivals etc. for the year 1997 and a 1998 calendar of events will be developed at the November 1997 meeting. Web pages are being designed by several of the communities and links will be noted for adjoining counties. USREC was an exhibitor at the International Conference of the Community Development Society in Athens, Georgia, 27–30 July 1997.

Unique features about USREC as a developing learning community

What is unique about USREC and other groups that may become learning communities? These are not in any order of importance or priority nor do they indicate a process flow. However, they have been observed (from the authors' perspective) in the many activities that serve to guide USREC as they work towards becoming a learning community.

Risk: Individuals and the group as a whole are willing to take risks. They don't mind getting together and discussing what is going on in a community or region and asking why (Daloz et al. 1996)? For example, they may ask why is there no recycling facility in the county? Why are people driving through our area instead of stopping for a meal or lodging? These, and other issues, have generated much discussion about how the group can make changes in the two-state region.

Vision: Individually and collectively the group has a vision for the community and their region (Lippitt, GL 1973). Their vision may not be the only idea or dream but they do not mind sharing and learning about the visions of others (Lippitt, GL 1973; Senge 1990, 1994). Visions for individual communities and counties were shared at the retreat which grew into a larger group vision of becoming a tourist destination around three lakes as well as a location for small business development.

Diversity: Within the USREC group membership a need for involving a broad cross-section of the community is seen (Lippitt, R 1980). Multiple neighbourhoods and small crossroads and communities come together to make the county or community a better place. More people need to become involved because there are more ideas, often conflicting, that suggest actions or projects that meet more needs in the community. Meeting in different locations in the two-state region has attracted more participants as evidenced by the mailing list currently expanded to over 120 individuals.

Open process: Ideas, issues, concerns, conflicts and strategies (regarding the activities) are kept in the open, reported in local newspapers, distributed in meeting

notes so that rumors can be addressed and people can see what is happening, thus enabling them to join in the dialogue. The learning process is an open and visible, continuing activity. At each meeting there is some new knowledge or content added to the group. Presentations, brochures, and new developments are all brought before the group to increase their awareness of the region. Notes from each meeting are sent out within two weeks of the meeting so that everyone can be informed about happenings. Also, the county sponsoring the next meeting often prepares news releases announcing the upcoming event.

Understanding: The open process contributes to helping residents understand and learn about their community. Conflicting points of view provide for more information, more discussion, and more dialogue to emerge, hopefully leading to a deeper understanding about issues and concerns by a larger group of residents (Freire 1972, 1974). At each meeting, a small committee of the group polls the membership and asks participants what new or continuing issues need attention. The committee then seeks out speakers or sources of information regarding these issues. Additionally, reports are requested from volunteers working on such tasks as web-page development, a yearly calendar of events, unique services offered to small businesses.

Conflict over ideas or issues: The group uses differing points of view as a tool for learning (Kenny 1996) and to gather information, explore unique ideas and options, collect and analyse local data, and share interpretations and findings. This way allows the dilemma to be examined by all. A recent series of conflicting points of view about zoning in one of the counties contributed to a discussion about what zoning can and cannot do for adjoining counties as well as the entire region.

Problem-solving and decision making: Community meetings, discussions, dialoguing and strategy sessions offer multiple opportunities for residents to become involved in community action and community development (Moore & Brooks 1996). Actions and developments in one part of the region have generated interest and actions in other parts of the region. What is unique about this process is the sharing of information and coordinating of activities across county and state boundaries that occurs as a result.

Funding and support: Part of the learning process for this group is looking for creative ways to work on community needs. The group has worked hard at keeping its options open and looking for different ways to generate resources and skilled help from the community such as volunteers, donations, memberships, community sales etc. Members routinely look to vocational and technical schools, community colleges, universities, volunteers, retirees, and cross-generational groups to assist with specific and targeted projects in the region rather than relying on the same groups to assist with each activity. By involving a cross-section of the community and different groups, the workload has been shared and several groups are being recognised for their assistance.

Actions of existing learning communities

Existing learning communities do things that promote the learning process. These communities have individuals, groups, or organisations that take on specific tasks or jobs for the community and report back to residents about their successes and failures. The authors have observed a variety of community actions and techniques for promoting the development of learning communities.

Successes and failures: Community groups have a tendency to focus on their failures rather than examining their successes. It may be too difficult to analyse an activity from an internal or local community point of view so it may be helpful to have an external reviewer help the group systematically critique the project. Community groups often use the same systematic review process for a variety of projects so that residents are familiar with the process and can use it for any community development strategy.

Volunteer teams: Volunteers add to the overall knowledge base if they have the opportunity to be selected or recruited to serve on community teams for a variety of activities such as data/information gathering, project design, implementation, and project reviews. Leaders that adopt strategies for spreading out the work, involving more people, and recognising more groups in the community for their help and support are able to broaden the base of support for change. This approach relates to Kanter's (1995) point about involving both locals and newcomers in community actions.

Stories and reviews: Story telling is a proven tool for sharing information and getting more people involved (Kleiner & Roth 1997; Vella 1994). Stories and reviews tell the story of the design, the struggle to implement it, the results, the impact on the community, and the successes or failures. They also allow the community to celebrate the results of activities, events and restarts of projects.

Promotion and visibility: Part of the recognition and story telling is promoting the results in the community. Residents, visitors and tourists benefit from being able to see coordinated street signage, flowers and plantings in parks and along streets, plaques for historic sites and other caretaking activities that help with finding the way throughout the community. Several communities in Georgia have used plaques to signify support from individuals and families who have paid for street lighting in downtown or other designated areas. This has been a powerful tool in achieving and expanding safe lighting for downtowns that results in more frequent use and possible location of small businesses.

Quick victories: It is better to start different tasks in smaller units so you can have early victories. Some communities have erected street lights, cleaned up downtown or countryside/road sides, painted building facades, used tree and flower plantings, and promoted safety in the community. These kinds of activities create a winning atmosphere that pulls other people into the process.

Sharing information: Community groups have adopted several different strategies for sharing information. Some have held forums, specified regularly scheduled meetings, or used special newspaper sections to share ideas about the community with all residents and visitors. Ideas, projects and future visions have been shared with a broad base of the population to keep them informed and to bring in other ideas for consideration. The expansion of telecommunications technology allows many community meetings to be held electronically in addition to face-to-face conversations (Doheny-Farina 1996).

Barriers to creating learning communities

Groups that are struggling with their efforts to become learning communities seem to be 'now' and 'money' focused. In other words they are too limited by what is happening today and are controlled by how much money they think will be needed to get the job done. Barriers which seem to block communities from moving ahead are presented in this section.

Vision: The lack of a shared vision of what could happen in a community often presents a barrier for community development (Lippitt, R 1980). Perhaps this is interwoven with the process of learning about the successes and failures of communities and what others have been able to do with few resources. If residents do not have a clear vision or idea of what they would like to see within the next several years, more time may be needed to learn about their community and what has happened in neighbouring or nearby communities.

Money, funding, support: Demanding that money or support be identified and collected before discussing visions, futures, and possibilities is one sure way to stop community dialogue before it starts. Ideas generated from the visioning and futures discussions will often attract money, funding, and support. If possible, postpone the discussion of financial needs until after the ideas are generated and the strategies for getting the job done are identified.

Issues, concerns, outcomes: Groups on their way to becoming learning organisations often take time to discuss the issues, concerns, and expected or unexpected outcomes of creative ideas. They explore ways to make the project, event, or outcome happen and then discuss the 'what ifs', pitfalls, and unexpected outcomes. Discussing scenarios, role plays and posing futures has been beneficial for community groups that have barriers to overcome about not being prepared or informed about community issues.

Leadership: Waiting too long for local leadership to move on a good idea can be a barrier to community improvements and change. The group may need to spend additional time in the learning, data gathering, information, and knowledge-generating process to inform local leadership of the benefits of ideas and possible futures. Also, conducting leadership development programs for groups is a great idea that often is not fully implemented. Communities that have a process, strategy, or mechanism for infusing the newly trained volunteers into existing community organisations seem to

have a better ability to use their talents and knowledge. Communities with organisations and groups that advertise for interested volunteers and trained leaders have greater potential for success in using these skills and talents for actions, projects and change.

Involvement: Without the involvement of a broad cross-section of the community, many people will be left out of the change process (Freire 1972, 1974). Community changes may encounter resistance and barriers erected by those excluded from the change-dialogue process. Communities that have a tradition for involving differing points of view, diverse backgrounds, and a variety of community interests in the discussion process seem to get things done.

What do learning communities look like?

Would you recognise a learning community if you drove through one? What do learning communities do that makes them different? Following are some observations about learning communities that the authors have visited and helped to design.

They transform themselves: Learning communities are constantly changing. When you ask a person on the street what is happening in Beautiful River City they can tell you about several activities and changes; show you the new park, tree plantings and flower beds; and tell you about a historic site or direct you to a bed and breakfast. Residents know about activities and historic sites because they helped organise the event or erect the signs directing visitors to the community building.

They share wisdom and recognition: Everybody is learning about something that can be added to the collective wisdom of the community. Everybody has a role in the learning and wisdom generating process. When you meet residents of Colquit, Georgia on the street they will introduce their friends as a star in the local play. The local play is about the heritage and history of the community and they are proud that over 300 residents either wrote parts of the play, are characters in the cast, or help put on the play. They recognise everyone for their contribution.

They bring in others: Individuals and groups in learning communities are constantly bringing in others within the community and outside the community to brainstorm ideas and give examples of how to problem solve or help clarify an issue. They seek new information and different ideas to add to the local mix of experience and wisdom (Kanter 1995).

They take time: Learning communities seem to take time for residents to think about issues and reflect on options before taking action. Discussion, dialogue, conflict and reflection are part of the learning process. Also important is the review and discussion of what happened and what needs to be changed before the process is undertaken again.

They share the results: Good or bad, learning communities share the results of projects, actions, and events. They take the time to systematically review processes, impacts, results and strategies.

Learning communities: Future and promise

Learning is an integral part of community development. Residents that talk with each other and share ideas about what is happening in their community are establishing the social capital networks and are constantly generating new knowledge. They like the way the neighborhood looks when flowers are blooming. They don't like having to lock their doors at night to protect against drug dealers and violence. They are concerned that local elected officials are not interested in helping to clean up the rubbish, or at least offer vehicles to haul away trash that is collected by residents. These are just a few of the experiences, discussions and situations that are shared in communities that impact on their future and promise. Following are some basic characteristics of learning communities (Moore & Brooks 1996):

Individuals contribute to the collective knowledge, skills, and wisdom of learning communities. Teams and small groups share information that contributes to the collective wisdom or intellectual capital (Stewart 1997) of communities.

Learning communities seem to emerge from locations that recognise that many residents have something to share (i.e., their intellectual capital or knowledge, skills and talents) and are willing to work together.

Working together seems to be enhanced when the group has a shared vision. Everyone sees his/her ideas and contributions in the vision.

Making something happen that is visible in the community, such as, street lighting; fixing building facades; cleaning up vacant lots; removing trash, litter and debris; and the like attracts attention because something is happening in the community that appears to be an improvement.

More knowledge and wisdom is gained by communities who can identify a broad cross-section of its residents to engage in visioning and creating the future (Kanter 1995) through involvement in organisations and associations that serve to enhance the community social capital (Falk & Harrison 1998). Communities that design creative ways to utilise their social capital in keeping all residents informed and involved, such as formal and informal organisations, leadership roles, public meetings, newspapers, or computer technology will be further ahead in their quest for learning and development.

Conclusions

Individuals, groups, agencies, organisations, and volunteers, and the norms for how they interact and dialogue, emerge as the critical elements in defining a learning community. These are the components of social capital in any community. How that social capital engages in discussion and dialogue about community issues becomes essential in determining the emergence of a learning community and how successful community development can be in that learning community. Most importantly, the learning community emerges when these elements of social capital have multiple opportunities to interact and dialogue in sharing their ideas and concerns. Coalitions are formed, special interests are identified, and community development projects emerge from these elements of social capital, most times some community group, organisation, or association, as they interact and learn about a community development issue or problem. Community development issues and problems, by their very nature, indicate the need for community actions to address them. Action-learning and action-planning is a product of the discussion and dialogue around shared ideas, learning from others, and problem-solving that occurs in community groups, the most obvious element of the social capital of communities.

If the community group, in a community development process, builds in a strategy for accomplishing short-term objectives and activities, and realises that several small accomplishments of this type can add up to successful results, they can be effective in their own community development. Building in adequate time for following up on community development projects, actions, activities, and learning is the outcome of sustainable community development. As a consequence, a learning community's residents, through this dialogue and discussion process, refine their personal knowledge of the community, improve their interpersonal communication skills, and articulate their individual concerns for community problems and how best to carry out successful community development.

Through this discussion and dialogue process of action-learning and action-planning, residents present ideas about what community development problem situations exist and how to collectively design ways to solve these problems. Involving community residents and community resources in the identification of community problems and solutions (Freire 1972, 1974; Mezirow 1978), what has been called the community action planning/action learning process (Moore & Brooks 1996), is a community-learning approach to problem-solving and community development. In addition, learning communities, in carrying out their community development activities, demonstrate the following characteristics. First, learning communities demonstrate a capacity for inclusiveness and empowerment. Second, learning communities encourage and facilitate the sharing of ideas, dialogue, and discussion across a large part of the community social capital. Third, learning communities are very capable of putting ideas into action. Fourth, learning communities focus on following up on plans and problems and in visioning the future. Fifth, learning communities plan for their own survival and sustainability. In short, they engage in a process of community development.

If neighborhoods and communities are going to survive and develop, if community sustainability is to happen, the community must have available the opportunities, the social capital, to facilitate this process happening. The learning community must emerge. Community residents must be able to listen, dialogue, discuss and take actions that can sustain their community. Learning about issues and concerns and applying solutions is basic to sustainable community development. Building upon the successes and failures of community dialogue and discussions is also part of the process. All of these actions are related to establishing networks for idea exchange, talking about community needs, and building the social capital of the neighborhood and community. This is the process of becoming a learning community. This is what a learning community which is successful in community development does.

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