

The Educator and Community Development

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Community development has been a significant Extension program for the last 15 years. This article redefines community development as a program of an educational institution. It discusses the role of an educator in community development and identifies key issues for the Extension staff member doing community development work. A question that might be asked is—Are these the important issues? If they are, how do you as a community developer-educator resolve them?

Community development practitioners employed by educational institutions and public planning and developmental agencies have a great deal to offer client communities. They have a unique opportunity to tackle the tough problems not being solved by existing institutions.

But the community development educator must choose between often conflicting operational concepts—such as education versus problem-solving action, neutrality versus advocacy, public versus social interests, and values versus facts.

As change agents and professional educators, they must develop their own unique style that meets the needs of the client group, but stays within the constraints imposed by their employer.

Definition

Community development is a process of group decision making that leads to action on community problems and enhances the community's social and economic well-being. It's gradually becoming an important part of Extension's total program in many parts of the country. The methods used vary widely, the objectives aren't always the same . . . but, some consensus is emerging about the general thrust of this relatively new emphasis.

The community developer is a "change agent" who works for change toward specific community goals. The decision makers are a "client system"—a group with common interests, dissatisfied with the current state of affairs, but with

some power to make changes in their own social system. The change agent-client system relationship at the community level is like the psychiatrist-patient relationship at the individual level.¹

Why *community* development? Communities are emerging as the focus for planned change for very good reasons. This conceptual system cuts across the three main decision-making systems of the market, most of government, and many public institutions—systems that are failing to handle many big issues. The problems, in a sense, “fall between the slats” of these systems, but could be picked up in a community framework.

Community Problems

What problems? They range from improving public services and facilities to creating more responsive government, increased citizen participation, and better leadership. From modifying existing human, physical, and economic development programs to creating new institutions that can handle emerging needs. From environmental and physical planning to problems in human relations and community decision processes.

A number of educational and developmental institutions have entered the community development field. Public and private colleges and universities, as well as public planning and development agencies, are examples of institutions that can acquire and help apply knowledge to

public issues. Their power to help communities lies in their ability and desire to work “in the field,” as well as the classroom, to “educate” decision makers.

Who Should Do Community Development?

Orientation

One of the basic issues in planned change processes is the orientation of the change-agent force itself. Who should assume the change-agent role?

The client group with a problem has several choices in terms of accepting change-agent help. The change-agent force can: (1) develop within the client system or (2) come from outside the system. The change agents may also initially be (1) self-appointed or (2) group appointed or requested.

In any case, the client system must approve or sanction the change agent in at least an informal way. The “authority” to become a change agent can only be granted by the client system. We’re dealing with the informal, public decision-making process where alliances are formed voluntarily and hopefully without pressure and force.

The change agent and the institution he represents can establish a relationship that is either (1) change-agent dominated at one extreme or (2) completely client-centered at the other.

Because of a unique orientation, the institution may be commit-

ted to implementing specific kinds of changes in the community and will deliberately or unconsciously work to influence group decision making toward certain goals. Or, the institution may be competent in only a few problem areas and will explore these areas more than others with the client, perhaps missing the most critical problems.

It's easy for institutions to "use" the client system to further their own goals or as a market for their own products, rather than to focus on client needs.²

Change agents that are client-centered help the group: (1) find its own will, (2) work out problems without imposing their own values, and (3) bring in the competencies required regardless of where the help comes from. The change agents are "objective"—they're not pushing a particular viewpoint. But, they are pushing for a change toward the goals identified by the decision makers in the system, with the help of the agent, after investigating a number of alternatives. Educational institutions can be credible, believable sources of help for many groups.

Limitations

What are some limitations of an educational institution's effectiveness in problem solving as it works in community development? Groups with problems may not turn to educational-developmental institutions for help as readily as all this implies. "Education" may not be considered

an appropriate element in problem solving. More direct group action may be preferred when the community is ready for it.

The public educational agency is limited to education by its public supporters and is often restrained from getting deep into action and implementation. The implementation of social change can upset enough interests to weaken the support for the educational agency and threaten its educational franchise.

This is one reason such institutions assume a neutral, objective role—at least as an official posture—and are reluctant to get into highly controversial issues where critical change is often needed.

Another severe limitation is the nature and purpose of the institutions themselves. The change-agent role may be considered a secondary mission of the institution with the primary emphasis on teaching resident students or basic research and advancing the professions.

Only institutions with a clear commitment to community problem solving and the determination and resources to back up the change agent-educator, can hope to get into the community development field and offer real help to policy makers.

The Role of the Educator-Community Developer

The educator-change agent "develops the community" by helping decision makers make better decisions through improved knowledge. He works within the group decision-making/social action/

policy-making processes that inevitably go on with or without the presence of a conscious change force.

He “educates” the decision makers, but in an informal way that’s some place between student-teacher relationship and a consultant-client relationship. He’s concerned with community needs not being handled by the existing, in-place systems. He finds the people with the interest and power to implement change and helps them reach their goals, to the limit of his competence and within his own value structure.

He feeds into the process the necessary information at the time it will do the most good, in a simplified form, cast in a decision-making framework. He brings in people with special competencies when his clients are ready to listen. He gradually helps build understanding, consensus, and eventually a recommendation for action that can be implemented.³

Community Development Issues

Not all students of community development will buy even this bare bones model. A number of issues are frequently debated and stands taken for or against, depending on the orientation of the community development practitioner. The issues represent basic differences in strategies, clientele, and goals among the special class of agents we have defined as educator-community developers; even larger differences are found when we examine the broad spectrum of change-agent activity. The

issues are raised here to point out variations in community development concepts.

Education Vs. Problem-Solving Action

The educator-change agent is often hard put to define just what “education” is and when education becomes “action” or something else. An outcome of education should be a change in behavior. Thus, new information generates changes in social systems.

But the question concerns the thrust of the educator’s efforts. He can concentrate on educating decision makers in a teacher-student context similar to a traditional classroom relationship, communicating relevant information and depending on his students to apply their knowledge with little of his help. Here the teacher doesn’t deal directly with the many facets of real-life problem solving.

Or, he can immerse himself in the client system by not only feeding in information, but by working to motivate change in internal distribution of power, improve communications, improve skills and define action strategies, help mobilize resources, design action steps—which is more than education narrowly defined. This intensive approach is, of course, much more time- and resource-consuming, but will more likely result in real change.

The further the change agent moves into the complex manipulations and strategies of community problem solving, the more he be-

comes a consultant, motivator, advisor, mediator, negotiator, analyst . . . and less a "pure teacher."

This kind of activity isn't wrong for the educator-community developer, but does stretch the concept of educator-teacher beyond a point acceptable to many educational institutions that employ these change agents. How far should an educator go into the "nitty-gritty" activities that influence change? Should he become the "complete" change agent?

Neutrality Vs. Advocacy

We have argued that the change agent be as objective as possible in working through problem solutions with client systems. He should be scientific, professional, dispassionate, yet concerned. But should the educator-community developer be neutral? Should he avoid making specific recommendations and expressing his own viewpoint, seeking only to help his clients articulate their desires?

Neutrality isn't easy to achieve and isn't necessarily the only approved stance for a change agent. The advocacy school of thought follows the rationale that strict neutrality is neither possible nor desirable and that after considerable study, the change agent should express a recommendation to the client as the real expert on the subject.

In both approaches, objectivity is maintained, but in the second approach, the advocate takes a stand based on his own understanding of the issue and presses for acceptance of his solution. He uses scholarly,

scientific methods to arrive at a viewpoint he can defend.

Public-supported educational institutions are uniquely qualified to provide largely unbiased, objective help to client systems. This is probably their greatest advantage as change agents. Most institutions or agencies are controlled by special, vested interests and are competent in only a few narrow areas of problem solving.

Large institutions of higher education and comprehensive multipurpose developmental agencies have the possibility of fielding a broad range of expertise and of maintaining an objective and perhaps neutral (but concerned) relationship with the recipient-client system. This kind of help is important to the client system in the early stages of problem solving where the real issues are to be discovered and the exploratory process can go in any one of several directions.

On the other hand, a strong, effective change agent who chooses to play the advisor-advocate role can be of great help to clients with problems. Educational institutions typically put emphasis on more neutral approaches and clients looking for strong advocates or advisers often turn to noneducational institutions for help.

Public Vs. Special Interests

Who should the change agent work with in the community? Who speaks for or represents the social system seeking to make changes and

who participates in the problem-solving process? Is it better to involve more people than less? Those with the most power or those with the least? Leaders only or rank and file, too? Should new leadership be encouraged?

We have avoided this issue until now by assuming a model where a client system with problems, made up of any group of any size, establishes a relationship with a change-agent force.

Life isn't that simple for the educator-community developer working for an educational organization as he approaches a community or a unique social system.

Is he constrained to work in a way that will somehow benefit the total community? Can he justify helping one group at the expense of another? Does he best serve the community when he helps develop some kind of majority consensus on change and follows that mandate? Is it his responsibility to see that all those affected by a decision have a voice in that decision?

Unfortunately, this is easier said than done. Only a small number of leaders become involved in community decision making on many issues and it's almost impossible to get real involvement of a majority of citizens. Apathy, ignorance, and powerlessness are formidable enemies of widespread citizen participation and the decision making is usually left to a relatively few articulate, active, powerful leaders who may represent only part of the total community.

Change agents can go to great lengths to ensure democratic decision making and full representation of competing interests, but this isn't easy. It's much easier and takes fewer resources to find and work with the power structure within the social system and hope the top influentials will do what is "right" for their community. Developing new leadership is slow and costly, but may be the only means to real change.

The educator-community developer has a responsibility to resist being captured by special interests within a geographic community . . . yet all interests are "special interests." Few citizens or change agents have any real notion or concern for total public good or general welfare. "Community" problems are usually unmet needs of a part of the community. They're solved piecemeal as they come up and solutions hopefully contribute to greater good for a larger number.

The tax-supported change agent has a responsibility to see that all groups are given equal opportunity. He must recognize that some groups and interests dominate the community and are likely to request his services more than other groups, to further their own ends.

Values Vs. Facts

Should the educator-community developer accept the values and culture of his clients or seek to modify what he finds? Should he communicate largely information that has little or no value content? What kind

of a value system should the change agent possess?

It's impossible to avoid some value transfer when two parties work together. Some deeply rooted values can be great barriers to community development. Public decisions based on the customary way of doing things can prevent escape from the situation that's at the heart of the problem. Value change is considered one of the main outcomes of educational efforts by many educators.

Who can say what values are of the highest order or what cultural patterns are "best" for the group? What right or authority does the change agent have to manipulate the basic value-cultural underpinnings of a community? Traditionally values are shaped by the home, church, and school. Moral and ethical questions are worked out by the individual, as he views society. The agenda for community development is set by these individual and collective norms.

The perpetrators of society depend on a process of socialization to teach rules of behavior and basic values that hold society together. Thus, society has an interest in value formation and value change. Some value substitution may be required if society is to survive serious value conflict.

At least most agents of change would agree that the client should understand the opportunity cost of holding to particular values or lifestyles, in terms of preventing attainment of desirable goals. And much can be done to structure group action to facilitate growth and change, without doing violence to previously acquired rules of behavior.

Other issues occupy the attention of community workers, but we don't have space to discuss them here. Let the debate go on, for this is the stuff we must work with every day. The choices of models and techniques to effect change are part of the larger decisions that determine the kind of communities we build.

Footnotes

1. Ronald Lippit, Jeanne Watson, and Bruce Westley, *The Dynamics of Planned Change* (New York, New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961).
2. John C. Weaver, "The University and Community Development," *Journal of the Community Development Society*, II (Spring, 1971), 5-12.
3. Charles A. Sargent, "Decision-Making Systems and Planned Change," *Journal of the Community Development Society*, IV (Spring, 1973), 115-27.