Exploring Theories of Socio-cultural Learning and Power as Frameworks for Better Understanding Program Planning within Community-Based Organizations

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Abstract: This essay presents a discussion of the sociocultural dimensions to learning and power in Community-based organizational program planning.

Introduction

Program planning theories in the adult education literature have largely investigated curriculum based models, technical or instrumental models, and power and political notions of program planning (Cervero & Wilson, 1994, 2006; Sork, 2000). Sork (2000) suggests that we consider three equally important dimensions of program planning: technical, sociopolitical, and ethical. He makes a case for the value of technical approaches to planning, noting the limitations of relying exclusively on technical models. His discussion of the sociopolitical domain centers on Cervero and Wilson's (1994, 2006) interpretations, suggesting that it is equally critical to the craft of program planning. Finally, he adds a dimension not often found in the program planning literature, that of ethics. Here his focus is on a deeper questioning of the moral and ethical justifications for what we do, who we do it with, and its connection to a larger expressed commitment to social justice.

Niewolny & Wilson's (2006) and Wilson & Nesbit's (2005) recent writing continues a conversation about the relevance of socio-cultural theories of learning and the centrality of expanding current attempts at understanding of power as they relate to adult education practice. Niewolny & Wilson (2006) trace two tributaries of literature, discussing Cultural Historical Activity Theory, CHAT, and related anthropological theories. Their argument is for an embodied and truly socially situated approach, along with a critique of the shortcomings of North American attempts thus far as an add-on approach. In both pieces, the discussion of power emphasizes a similar conceptual vein: the ideas that human agency and distributed power are dynamic, and indeed so fluid that it is hard to break out of our strongly held ideals to conceptualize it holistically.

One of the reasons I entered the field of adult education was to find a place where I could integrate my practical experiences and academic interests in community-based work, particularly program planning; cultural ways of understanding learning; and, social justice movements, especially feminist movements. While my experiences have, by and large, have been positive, the questions I entered the field with several years ago appear to have had relatively little movement. This is tough stuff: how to break ingrained habits and grapple with very human temptations to lean towards individual empowerment models, ongoing questions about how to get things done, and at the root, acceptance and exploration of a set of socio-cultural learning theories that challenge deeply held beliefs about agency, choice, autonomy, and morality. All the while, our environments and communities continue to face daunting and sometimes heart-wrenching living conditions.

It is to that end that I decided to slow myself down and not move through larger questions too quickly and to revisit many commonly accepted principles and assumptions about power and program planning in community-based organizations, or CBOs. For me, that meant re-asking what may appear to be very basic; making a list of my 'big issues' of former and current practice; identifying gaps in the literature; thinking about how those gaps may be already partially addressed in other disciplinary literatures; and, fighting the assumption that these issues will be solved by academics, rather than a coalition of people from a range of academic and practical leanings working together.

Research Approach and Selected Question

Drawing from and adapting previous empirical research, I combine data from two ethnographies and a third interpretive design study. The first ethnographic study was designed to explore and understand program planning in a feminist community-based organizational context. The research placed the 40-year history and socio-cultural dimensions of the organization or group at the center of analysis, as opposed to prioritizing individual member experiences or broad feminist social movement activities. Past findings from this research fits within feminist literature that identifies collective identity formation and learning, organizational power constructs, and ethical issues as critical factors in understanding feminist community-based groups (Bracken, 2003, 2004, 2005; English, 2005, 2006; Kaspar & Batt, 2003; Morgen, 2002, Urban-Walker, 1998). The findings also illuminated questions that warrant stronger connection to interdisciplinary literature and additional socio-culturally based research on power and program planning.

The second ethnographic study is designed to explore and understand the rooted history and working culture of a poor, rural county with increasing quality of life challenges such as land use and loss; poverty; infrastructure services (hospitals, social services, etc.); increasing crime rates and drug use; and population decrease magnified by brain drain patterns. It is just beginning to move towards studying community response to these challenges through exploring civic involvement and collective community problem-solving. (Bracken 2007b, 2008). Finally, the third study is an interdisciplinary team-based participatory action research project is intended to build non-profit board capacity through the study, analysis and implementation of board development initiatives on issues that human services boards face: communication, mission, effectiveness, participation, etc.

Together, there is a combined total of more than 400 hours of observation, a series of 48 face-to-face narrative, semi-structured interviews with participants, and corresponding analysis of organizational documents and artifacts such as meeting notes, minutes, public notices, working files, policy statements and project reports. (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995; Huberman & Miles, 1984). All of the data sources were combined and overlapped to construct an overarching view, a process described by Morse, Swanson & Kuzel (2001) as building 'incremental evidence'. The data analysis followed an iterative, multi-phased approach which included first and second level coding, clarifying data, and making connections (Baptiste, 2001) and is presented in the form of a constructed narrative.

An Organizational Narrative: We Need Help in Connecting Past, Present, Future

One of the compelling elements of ethnographic research is that it allows for an infusion of situated cultural and historical information and the perspectives held by CBO organizational or community members are decoded, and dynamically reshuffled. Stories of past victories, crisis

events, and everyday practices are essential to understanding the present and future. This issue was integral to all of the communities in the study – the idea that their past, their cultural practices was locked in a tension of when to honor and learn from and when to let go. One of the goals of this essay is to demonstrate or present an example of a CBO working culture as it might look when using a cultural and historical frame.

Paloma's reconstructed story about organizational history, power, everyday practices. Paloma has been a member of a women's CBO for almost 25 years. Growing up in a middle-class Latina family, she attended college and graduated with a degree in social work. Paloma has seen and experienced a lot: peaceful protest, heated protest with harassment and/or arrest, experiments with non-hierarchical organizational practices and a pendulum swing back and forth several times between that and highly structured top-down approaches to community development. She is an expert program planner, comfortable with the details as well as what she calls the 'lofty ideas' of social change. The CBO addresses a broad range of issues, helping communities with issues of poverty, nutrition, access to basic health care, community infrastructure and also advocating for policy change at a state and national level, once in a while international.

These are her reflections: Initially, I worked from a combined ethos of the popular education movement and the women's movement, believing that I could teach other women how to obtain and use power, just as one would learn to cook or give a public speech. Our strategies were built on a few core principles: information equals power; collective participation equals power, and power can be learned, taught, passed on to others. A lot of our group strategy was focused on redistribution of power and resources, whether voluntarily or through pressure/force. It was something we aspired to have and they [the establishment] had. It was direct. We really taught each other through trial and error, support and challenge. Then, it turned in on itself and we had a huge internal dispute: one of our organizational subcommittees which worked with the labor movement was skimming money, and when confronted, they wanted to break off and take financial and other resources. They waged a public smear campaign against the larger organization, presenting the conflict as a class issue. It was so bad that other CBOs came in and tried to mediate, afraid the conflict would hurt all of our social movement groups' credibility and work. We had to do incredible damage control with our funders, our community constituents. It was a mess. We found out that once issues of class [which are tied to ethnicity too] surfaced, they had to be dealt with. After the groups broke apart, it influenced our operations for years [still does].

Our view of power and social justice shifted somehow. Even with information, even with collective action, power is something that flows around and within our environments at all time. Rather than looking at power as something within a toolbox that can be passed around and added to, or as something we gather internally and direct outward to the larger community, we now conceptualize power as a lingering pilot light. It's there, waiting to be turned up, turned down. It's not associated with a person as positive or negative anymore. All of us are connected to the pilot light whether we know it or not, and we can warm and sustain, we can burn. Somehow we missed that. It can be lurking out of sight...small...nearly invisible.

Newcomers come in [now] with their own histories and struggle to make sense of our quirks...weird everyday practices and conversations that are designed to protect us from mis-use of power with each other. There are only a few of us left who experienced 'the crisis' ....yet the organization is still evolving in response to what happened. On the other hand, we have a heightened awareness of the importance of a culture of ethics and shared responsibility and of

our public image. We are also more unrestrained, ruthless even, in leveraging power for community change, as if once unleashed, and something horrible happened, we can't go back to the nurturing or utopian ideals we once held.

What's interesting is that we have moved away from a list of rules concerning organizational ethics. Don't get me wrong, we have some accounting [money] checkpoints now. We have moved to an approach where we support a climate where we articulate and stress our everyday responsibilities and privileges to each other, not just the big ones that show up on lists. There is continuity. It's not situational ethics, it ticks me off when people typecast it that way. We have an ongoing dialogue, with less romantic definitions of social change and more day to day approaches. Why? We realized that it is impossible to do our kind of work without trusting each other and being away from 'watchful eyes'. We realized we were burning ourselves out. We realized that we weren't protecting ourselves by having open discussion about what power is beyond the expected 'they have it, we want it'. You know, *la lucha* [the fight]. In fact, we joke about the whiplash effect: how hard it is to be restrained, share internal power, be nurturing...and then turn up the pilot light and fight for social change 'out there'. We also realized that we are not sophisticated enough in our social change strategies and are getting pretty creative...doing our homework. So, we're experimenting with ways to learn and teach each other about culturally [ethnic, race, gender, class, sexuality] appropriate ways to make change. One ideology or organizational approach doesn't fit. I can't explain it to an outsider but we are less guarded, angry, yet stronger, less afraid of our work. We are seeing and doing things differently now.

Discussion and Connection to Literature

What can we learn and what can we do as academics involved or interested in socio-cultural frameworks of power and program planning practice? Returning to the challenges set forth in the introduction, how can we identify and learn to work more substantively with integrated rather than add-on approaches, as argued by Niewolny & Wilson (2006)? First, we can open a dialogue and consider how methodology drives the research framework, process and findings. Methods which honor holistic ways of knowing and expression, which allow for the time and care of developing a sense of collective historical and cultural narratives as a part of the research are critical. This stands in juxtaposition to our professional pressures and practices to conduct tighter, less messy qualitative studies and to impose technical frameworks and publishing processes over the integrity of analysis and findings. Epistemological and practical dialogues, such as recent essays by Elizabeth St. Pierre (2006) and John Dirkx (2005), or Patti Lather (2007) are beginning points of a long, continued journey. Seeking out and making more visible cultural narratives that are unlike our own are tangible steps we can take (Mohanty, Russo, and Torres, 1991).   We can also infuse our literature with examples of what studies in this vein that are done well, as a counter-narrative to critique without constructive movement forward.

Cunningham (2000) suggests that we broaden and deepen our interdisciplinary tradition through a careful re-examination of social movement and other related literatures. To illustrate, work by Fiss and Hirsch (2005) argues that frame creation and sense-making are not as technical or cognitively driven as prior social movement literature has approached it. They suggest that the technical and socioculture are indeed more integrated than we once thought. Their socio-cultural interpretation of learning and meaning making with social justice related public discourse strategies offers a way to return to our past and fuse it with the present and futures.

Their work bears revisiting with a reinterpretation of what it means to be an actor, to exercise power, and to understanding power relations. Reese & Newcombe (2003) also write about social movement concepts of *framing*, looking to more holistic environmental understandings of organizations involved in community and social change. Their argument about the inadequacy of past applications of framing concepts as the four rational or technical analytic points are strikingly parallel to the program planning literature: identify problem, examine causes, propose solutions, establish reasons for action.

Looking towards more cohesive blends of technical skills and sociocultural dimensions of power, Druckman & Nelson's (2003) discussion of political framing within public discourse as having a half-life of sorts and how information in cross-cutting versus homogeneous group situations can influence the impact of public messages. Their article suggests that there are possibilities for counter-narratives concerning elite messages or elite framing, and political strategies regarding public discourse and social change can be examined through that lens.

In the past, I've used Margaret Urban Walker's (1998) conceptualization of collaborative-expressive ethics as a way to infuse a program planning analysis with an ethical dimension that includes sociocultural and historical learning perspectives. This is but one example of a case where we can proactively change our habits and position the technical, social, political and ethical as interrelated rather than separate entities.

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