

Diversity, action, reflection, collaboration:

Lessons learned from community development education in B.C.

This article draws from the research **Danyta Welch**'s Masters thesis, *Lesson Learned in Capacity Building: A Review of the Community Development Education Projects of the Social Planning and Research Council of BC* prepared for the School of Community and Regional Planning at the University of British Columbia.

IN SMALL AND RURAL COMMUNITIES across British Columbia capacity building has become a catchphrase for promoting economic growth, social vibrancy, quality of life, and local development. The reasons for this are multiple and complex, but in many cases the push for community capacity building has grown out of the realization that individual communities can no longer rely on local, provincial, or federal levels of government to provide social, economic, and ecological well-being.

But how do communities build their capacity? How do you nurture the skills required to maintain or re-establish the economic, social, and ecological integrity of communities? And—perhaps more importantly—how do communities know which capacities they need to develop, who is the appropriate teacher, and what does this kind of education look like? One answer can be found in the provision of community development education projects by regional organizations such as SPARC BC. This article briefly examines the lessons that can be learned from SPARC BC's experience in community development education and which can help other regional organizations

to positively impact capacity building in small towns and rural communities in B.C., or in similar regions.

Diverse participation needs to be actively encouraged

A consistent element in the capacity building literature is partnerships. The need for “effective partnerships at the local level with governments, Aboriginal organizations, business, labour and informal groups of active citizens” has been identified as a key approach to community development (Skills Development Canada 2004). As well, in its evaluation of numerous rural community development projects, the Canadian Rural Partnership identified the trend of getting “the cooperation and support” of local groups as a problematic and recurring necessity in their projects (Canadian Rural Partnership 2002).

The question of how regional capacity building organizations can best broker cross-sectoral participation looms large. For example, is one large community process more useful than separate processes for each sectoral audience? In

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the experience of SPARC BC, however, community members are not only identifying missing community sectors, but are also aware that these are the representatives they need to work in partnership with for long-term community development. This suggests that capacity building organizations may have a greater role to play prior to the delivery of workshops in actively encouraging diverse sectors to attend and assisting local organizations in networking to ensure relationships are formed before a learning event or community process begins.

The “value of diversity and the importance of inclusion of women, youth, disability and ethno-cultural learning needs” has also been identified as a cornerstone of best practices in community development work (Skills Development Canada 2004). SPARC BC’s experience in community development education highlights the need to be aware of, and sensitive to, the sometimes differing needs of community groups. For example, respondents from the Community Development Education Pilot and Creating Collaborative

Communities projects identified, to varying degrees, how the workshop impacted women, youth, seniors, people with disabilities, and First Nation people and communities.

Action needs to balance reflection

Just as community development involves “action, reflection, action, and so on” (SPARC BC, 1995: i) regional capacity building organizations need to incorporate checks and balances to ensure that adequate reflection is inserted into their work. Such reflection can be accomplished in many ways, including through the use of evaluations and guiding principles.

Evaluation of community development education approaches is a critical component in capacity building that needs to include a defined approach to measuring the impact of community capacity in order to build knowledge concerning how to impact outcomes and how to define the synergistic elements that support capacity building. And yet, evaluation is not being done in a comprehensive manner in B.C. For exam-

What Community Development Educators Can Do to Increase Participation:

- Model collaborative approaches by increasing scope of partnerships and collaborations between regional organization
- Encourage participation from diverse cultural and interest groups. A single community group is not representative of the community
- Encourage networking and community participation as an element of a life-long learning that is central to community development.

What Community Development Educators can do to Increase Reflective Practice:

- Incorporate a mutual learning perspective—the key is to “work hard to both educate and learn from citizens” (Burby, 2003:44).
- Use comprehensive, long-term evaluations to understand the link between programs and community development and relate these impacts to funders
- Take the front-end time to develop values and principles in order to deliver programs that are consistent with the organization mission or purpose and which address community need.

ple, of the nine leadership organizations identified in the CED Leadership Report, including SPARC BC, “several use databases to track course evaluations and results but only [two organizations] are doing longer term community impact assessments with participants” and only one group uses an external evaluation scheme on a yearly basis (Colussi, 2005: 8).

Guiding principles

While reflection and adaptation are good things, the use of guiding principles and values also appear to be a critical element in balancing action and reflection. Indeed, it has been stated that “to revitalize a community from the inside, we must ensure that there exists certain values and principles—of inclusion, mutual respect and equitable access to community resources” (Ronaghan 2003). Guiding principles allow flexibility to be mixed with consistent and intentional values, and assists in the delivery of locally appropriate workshops without reinventing the curriculum for each location.

What Community Development Educators Can do to Increase Collaboration:

- Be aware of the vast community development education expertise available in BC to address the capacity building needs of local communities.
- Recognize the tremendous value of modeling and facilitating partnership and collaboration development
- Create better linkages between local and regional organizations
- Develop networking mechanisms for regional organizations to come together
- Build partnerships with government agencies, at policy and programming level

Organizations benefit from collaboration

The Government of Canada’s Rural Secretariat has stated that “innovative community development approaches should be identified and shared” (Rural Secretariat 2004 3-4). Recognizing this and the fact that “regional partnerships and alliances create more opportunities and resources” (Colussi, 2005b: 24), collaboration within the capacity-building sector is a goal worthy of consideration. Yet, like evaluation, this does not appear to be happening on a significant scale in B.C.

The experience of SPARC BC suggests that encouraging and modeling collaboration is valuable, and is welcomed by most agencies in B.C. involved with capacity building projects.

The lessons described above are the accumulation of years of learning, and form a strong model for capacity building that should guide community development for years to come.

If you are interested in learning more about this topic, the complete thesis is available from SPARC BC.

REFERENCES

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