Neighbourhood Centres - Spaces and Bases for Authentic Community Development and Citizenship

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I respectfully acknowledge the traditional owners of the land upon which we are gathered. It is a privilege to be standing on Country. I also acknowledge the many colleagues and community members who have journeyed with me in community development practice and research. This talk today discusses some of the insights I’ve been able to glean from our work together. I’d like to start this presentation by thinking about the theme of the conference - Neighbourhood Centres and their role in “Authentic Engagement”.

The Macquarie dictionary defines authenticity as something that is “entitled to acceptance or belief; reliable; trustworthy; or of genuine origin”. To engage is “to occupy the attention or efforts of (a person); or to become involved” (Macquarie Concise Dictionary 2009). Therefore, authentic engagement could be summed up as giving or paying attention to, or being involved in activities that are genuine; that are real; that are not tokenistic, contrived or only symbolic.

Donna Rooney’s (2011) research on Australian neighbourhood centres as places of adult learning shows they are involved in a multiplicity of activities and these activities are often encapsulated in their identity statements. For example, the centre where I worked on the Sunshine Coast has as its vision statement: “Building Community by Working Together”. The number of daily activities that take place at that centre involving people working together to build community is immense as I am sure it is in your centres. Rooney (2011) lists a number of verbs that demonstrate the dynamic ways neighbourhood centres get involved in community. They “address, change, connect, create, deliver, develop, improve, initiate, link, lobby, reduce, research, run, serve, stimulate, strengthen, and support” (Rooney 2011). This accounts for why you might feel a bit tired from time to time!

Numbering over 1000 in Australia, neighbourhood and community centres vary in size and focus. Our national peak body, ANHICA (the Australian Neighbourhood Houses and Centres Association) recently conducted a national survey of centres. This shows that across all states neighbourhood centres share a common characteristic; they subscribe to a community development focus by responding to grassroots demands (ANHICA, 2011). Furthermore, most utilise a community management model, which means they are community-owned and managed through volunteer committees. Getting to the heart of the matter, and put simply by Rooney, people ‘are involved in defining and taking action on the issues that affect them’ (Tett, 2005:126, cited in Rooney 2011).

One might argue that this action in itself is an act of authenticity. When people get together to build the kinds of communities in which they wish to live, work and play, there is an inherent genuineness in those processes. Assisting people to gain a sense of agency about their ability to build community could be considered the litmus test for authentic community development.

I wonder, however, about the extent to which neighbourhood and community centres are or can be vehicles through which community members can develop these kinds of analyses and actions. There are a number of challenges that contemporary neighbourhood centres face that possibly work against these kinds of authentic processes and I will briefly focus on just two of these.

The first challenge to authenticity involves the wider political and social context in which organisations currently operate. These factors can be imagined as existing on the vertical plane, that is, conditions originating from the structures in society, or wider trends which impact on local-level work. The second challenge to authenticity involves the methods practitioners use. For example, the methods used when engaging community members and when undertaking the ongoing work that builds people’s capacities to develop their own communities. These actions can be imagined as existing on the horizontal plane, that is, work found in local communities.

Factors on the vertical plane encompass what governments may or may not consider as a priority. Through social policy planning processes, governments determine what are the "problems" in society (Bauchi 2009:xii). If these are problematic enough, resources are allocated to address them. This itself is an issue for us as a sector, as with a structural analysis about disadvantage, we need to be concerned about policy-making processes. The identities of people from specific groups in society are constructed in particular ways within the policy discourse and we need to understand these analyses.

It is important to consider for a moment the historical context in which our community development work is located. Looking at our history helps us make sense of how policy makers are constructing "development" today. Furthermore, when thinking about our roots or traditions we might rediscover forgotten approaches we wish to reclaim. So, for a few paragraphs, I will take a brief look at some history.

Community development in this country has a long and rich tradition that can be traced back to the 1850s when the first formal cooperatives were established (Australian Unity 2008). These were often associated with agriculture

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and primary industries, for example, butter cooperatives and cotton gins in rural Australia. Prior to Federation in 1901 and the establishment of social welfare policies and their associated financial payments, ordinary Australians faced with common unmet needs and with a faith in mutual self-help formed Friendly Societies (Halliday, O'Connor & de Simone 1994). These became the first financial ‘safety net’ where members made small weekly contributions to a common fund that paid benefits to members who became ill, lost work or suffered hardship (Australian Unity 2008). This tradition is still alive in neighbourhood centres today. You may be familiar with ‘savings and loans circles’ or ‘money co-operatives’ (see for example, Burkett & Sheehan 2009, and resources and publications through Foresters Community Finance).

Since those early days of post-colonialisation, the welfare state has been established. Susan Kenny (2011) argues that the role of government in a welfare state is to ensure the security and prosperity of its citizens. The government will establish protective structures, processes and institutions to provide universal services in areas such as medical insurance, public housing and social security. Over time, we have seen varying degrees of univernalism or residualism in government expenditure according to the philosophical perspectives of the two major political parties in government at the particular time (Jamrozik 2009). For example, at present in Queensland, we are seeing a decidedly constrained environment that has been quite shocking for people who do not remember conservative political times. “What will Campbell cut next?” is the question asked daily in my state.

In New South Wales, you have some centres dating back to the 1960s. When discussing the establishment of neighbourhood centres in Australia, Rooney (2011) argues they developed alongside the women’s movement in the 1970s. With an analysis of inequality and injustice about gender, race and poverty, the ferment associated with various world-wide social movements in the 1960s created mechanisms by which to channel people’s energy for reform and justice into planning and participation processes in 1970s. During the short-lived Whitlam government, a national community development scheme was established known as the Australian Assistance Plan (AAP) (Kenny 2011:39). Programs funded through the AAP aimed to provide a coordinated regional approach for responding to people living in poverty (Whitlam 1972). With its emphasis on co-operative work within neighbourhoods, it could be argued that one legacy of the AAP is the community/neighbourhood centres movement.

The final historical epoch that has a bearing on our thinking about the current context for “development” in this country emerged during the 1980s. This was an era where radicalism and progressive social change was replaced with the world-wide trend in New Right politics and reform. This era saw the rise of the individual within a neo-liberal framework and a market ‘logic’ was birthed during this period (Kenny 2011). Subsequently, we saw that citizens were valued because they were either producers or consumers (Kenny 2011), not just because they were citizens. Also at this time, non-government organisations were positioned into a purchaser/provider relationship with government and were expected to participate in competitive market processes (Rooney 2011). This was the time when we saw a shift from humanitarian ideals to those driven by economic bottom-lines. Efficiency, productivity and risk management were the order of the day. As I tell my students – once I got my social work degree in the late 90s and started leading a neighbourhood centre, I felt I needed a law degree and a business degree too! Fortunately, I was able to attract community members with that kind of expertise onto our management committee.

The dominant paradigm for social and community service work now is various forms of service delivery. I define service delivery as actions or interventions that are replicable and targeted towards or for various population groups in society. That is, work that is repeated over and over, with numbers of people coming through the service, who are often worked with for set time periods and then exited from the service (Lathouras 2010). Regardless of the quality of this form of work, service provision can be seen as epitomizing a ‘top down’ orientation. This orientation is one where the service largely determines the need for programs. The service obtains the resources, sets the agenda and because of the structured nature of the processes, can often pre-determine the outputs associated with the work.

You can see why a service-delivery approach would be appealing to funding bodies that have a neo-liberal orientation. Reducing perceived risk, predicting processes and working with large numbers of people would be seen as ‘efficient’ and a preferable way for governments to invest tax revenue. If you have been around for a while, you will remember when, as part of our contractual obligations with government, we started to have to count and categorize people who came into our neighbourhood centres according to identifiable groups. These statistics were reported back to government and formed evidence for government spending on groups deemed in some way “problematic” (Baach 2009:xii) within social policy development processes.

‘Bottom-up’ or citizen-led community development is often at odds with the top-down nature of the service delivery system. Work in communities that is pre-determined, predictable, neat and orderly is a far cry from what we read in the community development literature about its purpose, where people ‘are involved in defining and taking action on the issues that affect them’ (Tett, 2005:126, cited in Rooney 2011, my emphasis). The question that begs to be asked is ‘how far have we strayed from community development’s purpose?’ This is one of the tensions contemporary community development workers and their employing agencies face. They need to hold
in tension the top down/bottom up nature of the work in funded contexts. This, I believe, is one of the main challenges for authentic community development today.

This dichotomy leads to the second challenge to authenticity for us in contemporary times: the methods workers use for both engagement and capacity-building activities. I am talking now about a worker's analysis about what issues to work on and how to go about addressing them. Much of the literature on community development is quite clear that as a practice, it is meant to be emancipatory or a vehicle through which people experience liberation from oppression (see for example, Burkett 2001; Gilchrist 2009; Ife & Tesoriero 2006; Kelly & Burkett 2005; Kelly & Sewell 1988; Kenny 2011; Ledwith 2011; Weeks, Hoatson & Dixon 2003). A structural analysis of the root causes of poverty and inequality suggests issues in that realm need to be addressed. This kind of analysis stems from theorising about social problems arising from a specific context, not the failings of individuals (Mullaly 2007). It also acknowledges the inherent conflicts that exist in society whereby certain groups gain and hold power and influence at the expense of others (Popenpe & Quinney 2002). Consideration is given to issues of social and economic inequality, the distribution of wealth and the subsequent access this gives some people to political and other types of power. With these kinds of analyses, community development becomes the vehicle through which people can gain a voice and increase their power through collective action.

Another factor that creates a tension for authentic engagement emerges from our own sector. Many of the professions of which we are a part are inherently conservative. I am using the term in its political science sense: conservative meaning the slow, incremental evolution of society as opposed to progressive politics, that is, commitments to interventions with a reform agenda (Aly, 2010). For thirty years now, we have been bathed in neo-liberal thinking and practice. It is entrenched in our psyches too.

Furthermore, governments that fund our programs are inherently conservative, regardless of any rhetoric they may espouse about progressive politics. Our last federal election was a good case in point. We saw both major parties competing with each other for what has been called 'a race to the bottom': the bottom of the barrel, where policies and leadership based on values and principles have been lost. We are seeing business interests and greed trumping people's needs. The idea of social justice, things like - equality and social responsibility - have fallen out of public discourse. Any future justice for our children and their children when we think about climate change has also been given scant regard.

The emancipatory nature of community development should create space for people to gain a voice about issues that affect them. People involved in community development processes gain a shared analysis about issues; they use the power of the group to pool their resources and gain new resources for their communities. They develop new skills and gain confidence. Most importantly, they develop new relationships that break down the effects of social isolation, which, as we know, have many associated negative health consequences. If you are a development practitioner, no doubt you will have witnessed the point in a group process where people get a taste of the power associated with these kinds of processes. They become unstoppable. This is what one of the participants in my research study humorously called "the drug of a CD worker...when you see the spark of imagination in people's eyes; the possibility that exists when something gets and the group starts to commit to action together (Research Participant, my emphasis)". For this worker, the addictive quality occurs when, more and more, she/he wants to see and experience people gaining a sense of liberation from oppression.

Now, to turn to some suggestions or ideas for community development workers or other types of practitioners who wish to adopt a more developmental approach to their work. By "developmental" I mean a more 'bottom-up', or citizen-led and mutually relational approach to practice. Following this, I will explore some suggestions or ideas for managers and management committee members of neighbourhood centres.

In the first instance, view community members as citizens in their own emancipation. See them as people involved in their own collective empowerment, not people who are to be 'serviced' as clients. In other words, engage in what is known as non-directive practice (Batten & Batten 1988), or lead from behind.

Secondly, see and make the connections between various programs at your centres and potential developmental work. I discuss this as providing "multiple pathways into community development activities" (Lathouras 2010:19). As soon as a caseworker at your centre, or someone who works predominantly with individuals, hears the same kind of story repeated by more than one individual, then there can be a mandate for beginning a process of banding individuals together in the public realm through collective action. We listen for the "public" potential within individuals' stories, that is, their issues, hopes and dreams that are shared by others. We need to take advantage of the fact that many people are coming to our centres for a wide variety of activities and use those opportunities for developmental work.

Thirdly, gather people together and create a safe space for conversations around issues with which people are struggling; affirm their capacity and extend people's capacity. Fourthly, make decisions about things that we can do together to work towards personal growth and social change.

Much of this kind of developmental work is also about not doing things. We have already discussed the need to resist "servicing" people. This may be challenging, particularly if the people we work with are used to that form of practice. Therefore, the fifth suggestion is to not organise anything
without genuine energy and passion being present. Or, in other words, do not motivate people into action by using rewards or sanctions (Andrews 2007). Once that genuine motivation is apparent, then develop structures to hold the process around that spirit, passion and sense of responsibility (Andrews 2012). The sixth suggestion is simply to stick at it. Social change is slow and long-term work and therefore it is important to develop strategies to sustain yourself for the long haul in this work.

Very importantly, the seventh suggestion involves critically reflecting on your practice, both individually and with colleagues. (See for example an approach to critical reflection developed by Fook (2004) and Morley (2005; 2011), Rawsthorne and Howard (2011) argue for community development practitioners to establish communities of practice, to ensure the knowledge base for practice is progressed. As a sector, we will then benefit from one another's practice wisdom. One of the findings in my research study showed that practitioners were not engaging in critical reflection or developing a collective analysis about practice to a significant depth. A characteristic of bottom-up practice is that it emerges from the people involved, as opposed to top-down practice where outputs are put in place as a result of a particular program or project. Bottom-up forms of practice can present challenges to workers because there can seem to be fewer 'road maps' for practice. Ensuring effectiveness in practice can be problematic in these circumstances and, therefore, prioritising time for such reflection individually and collectively is essential.

A final suggestion for practitioners, and for all of us who together form the field of practice, is to become much more purposeful and disciplined about writing down our processes and the outcomes of our work. We need to tell those stories. In an era when "efficency" is the mantra, "effectiveness" does not always get a guernsey. Surely, helping people in their own community development efforts has to be an effective strategy and good use of our time and resources. If people do not have to keep coming back to our agency for assistance, but have formed trusting relationships with others in their communities; have developed a shared analysis and commitment to action; and have gained skills and confidence about their efforts, this is effective work. I encourage you to publish your efforts so others can read these stories. For example, Australia's only community development journal, New Community Quarterly, is always keen to publish stories of effective work. Likewise, the International Association for Community Development encourages members to connect with community development activists around the globe and share stories of good practice. I also encourage you to develop partnerships with universities and academics for whom research and formal knowledge-development is their core work.

Now for some suggestions or ideas about developmental practice for managers and management committee members of neighbourhood centres.

Firstly, view your centres as publicly-owned infrastructure where citizens carry out their own development activities. Create a welcoming space; your centre is a place where people develop a sense of belonging and a base from which they can take action. We are seeing a trend towards public space becoming more regulated, managed, and controlled (Kallhoff 2011). We are also seeing a world-wide trend in the risk management discourse. Its associated regulations, standards and policies are superseding the ability for groups of community members to take responsibility for their own actions (Milbourne & Cushman 2012). These are the types of ethical dilemmas management committees and staff of centres face daily. Unfortunately, because of the weight of these and other burdens we are seeing, small community associations are closing down or amalgamating with bigger more corporately-oriented structures. All of this means community-owned activities which are close to the ground, nimble and responsive to emerging needs, are at risk of being lost to us.

Secondly, allow your workers the time it takes to make connections and build relationships with community members. These are the formative processes essential for development work. My practice wisdom suggests that it takes around 100 “engagement” type activities to hear enough private stories that have potential for public action; to develop enough relationships; and to create those safe spaces for people to explore ideas together before we see one group committing to on-going action. This type of on-going action is what we might name “capacity-building” activity. That seems like a large ratio, I know. But to undertake an authentic process of engagement - one led by and sustained by citizens - this is the type of effort required. This all takes time, so giving your staff space to do this formative work is essential.

Thirdly, determine the degree to which external resources constrain or enable your organisation’s purpose and strategise accordingly. With funding come ties and the warning, 'be careful what you wish for', is apt. Pearce (2010) questions whether social change can be fundable at all, given the emphasis on professionalised practice and bureaucractic processes. She argues that non-government organisations in receipt of funding for community development are embedded in "a structural dilemma". They need to make choices about their role in social change processes (Pearce 2010). Further, the way in which organisations analyse power and position themselves as agents of change is pivotal for just change in contemporary contexts (Pearce 2010). Neighbourhood centres are well-placed to harness human capital and other forms of social capital (Putnam 2000). Taking an assets-based approach to community development (Kretzmann & McKnight 1993) can, for example, offer freedom from constraining ties that may restrict us from enacting our purpose.

Finally, apply community development principles organisationally and structure your work ‘beyond the local’. This is where we make connections between both the horizontal and vertical planes in society. Think about the
principles of collectivity, cooperation and empowerment as a sector. The collective voice of neighbourhood centres needs to be heard in social policy-making realms and other realms. There is strength in numbers.

I will finish by referring to Brian Smith's (2012) "Life with Brian" blogpage. His second point about the risks associated with inauthentic engagement relate to our becoming too comfortable, or not wanting to go out of our comfort zones. Paulo Freire (Freire & Macedo 1999:51) talked about "curiosity" or our willingness to be surprised in this life. When we ask critical questions or when we take an exploratory stance, as opposed to knowing the answers before we even start, we will be continually surprised about the possibilities that open up before us. This means taking a kind of "action-research" (Stringer 2007) approach to our work. This is where we accept that we are learners forging new ground in uncertain terrain.

There is no doubt that with the current state of the world and its problems and the lack of leadership from our politicians, we need all the curiosity and imagination we can muster. Couple this with processes that community development approaches enable, then this opens up a myriad of possibilities as individuals could never have imagined.

In conclusion, the President of the International Association for Community Development, Ingrid Burkett, argues this is "a time of possibilities" and it requires progressive practitioners to respond to current dilemmas and contexts in the spirit of idealism and creativity and with a clarity of purpose couched within a strong values base (Burkett 2011). I believe neighbourhood centres and their connectedness to grassroots communities have an immense role to play in tapping into that potential for social change.

I wish you all the very best in your work.

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