

Community Development Practice: Stories, Method and Meaning

Ann Ingamells, Athena Lathouras, Ross Wiseman, Peter Westoby, Fiona Caniglia
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On rare occasions, a book comes across one's path that takes one back to their very first lessons learned about ways of working with people – in this case community development. From the first pages of this book, written collectively by some of the best known and well respected community development workers in Queensland, there are reminders from those who have carved out the path of development practice, and created the 'traditions' that form the foundations for the stories told within. This book has an air of nostalgia from start to finish, not only in the writing itself and the reflective narratives of community practitioners, but in the way that literature has been woven through the stories giving them a depth and connection back to those who have gone before. As a former community development worker myself, settling in to read this book was a reminder of why I so enjoyed that work and have such respect for those who manage to stay true to the principles of development practice in the face of so many challenges.

In setting the context for this book, Ann Ingamells reminds the reader of the contributions of people like Anthony Kelly and Sandra Sewell who wrote the much-loved 'With Head, Heart and Hand' back in 1988; Carmel Daveson, Connie Benn, Ingrid Burkett, Dave Andrews and Maria Tennant, and those on whom their work was built – such as Paulo Friere, Martin Buber and Ivan Illich. In continuing this tradition of reminder, Athena Lathouras then goes on to include Sugata Dugupta, Rabindranath Tagore, and Mahatma Gandhi in her illustration of the how underpinning values and practice principles of development work influenced community processes in the work of the Nambour Community Centre and the 'Cultural Connections' program. Athena shows the power of the 0-1-3 method, a relational method built on the concepts of connection and mutuality, through a number of examples ranging from development of budgeting programs such as 'Living well with less' through to initiatives within the CALD community such as the formation of the Srikandi Indonesian Women's group. The chapter concludes with some words of caution that community development work relies on people being ready to engage, and the '*community development practitioner needs to be prepared to approach the work as a learner, not the expert; they need to be a facilitator, not the coordinator or driver; they need to carry their agenda lightly; and they need to go at the pace of the community, or the slowest among the group, to ensure all are integral to the process*' (p. 27).

As the chapters continue, we read about the story of the 'Circle of Men Project' narrated by Ross Wiseman as he recounts the experiences of two community members, Mike and Washuntara, who became involved with a group of older men living in an aged care facility. This project arose from local concerns about the suicide rates of older men, and the need to reconnect men to their communities to lessen social isolation, boredom and loneliness. The Project focused on 'bringing the outside in and taking the inside out' but those involved encountered many barriers largely structural in nature. Exploring the context of the aged care industry at a broad level, and then providing an analysis of the context at the local level, enabled those involved with the Circle of Men to formulate a vision with potential to extend far beyond the fences of the facility itself. The commentary on this Project provided by Karen Finlay, Mark Creyton and Ann Ingamells highlighted the community capacity building potential of the Circle of Men and concluded that *'our every action in community builds our collective awareness of what is really going on, and begs our consideration if that is what we want, and if not, what we can do about it'* (p. 54).

The third example provided is by Peter Westoby where he recounts the story of his lengthy engagement with the Southern Sudanese community, and his PhD research that explored 'social processes of healing' rather than therapeutic ones. Westoby gives a valuable insight into the history of the Sudanese refugee position in Australia, which forms the backdrop to the conflict that he experienced in his attempts to explore dialogue and building of bridges between 'western culture and a refugee community'. This story clearly illustrates the often difficult tightrope that community development workers have to walk when working with communities in internal and inter-generational conflict. The analysis of Peter's struggle provided by Polly Walker, John Diew and Di Zetlin gives multiple perspectives on cultural worldviews, the role of bi-cultural work colleagues, and the important role of theory in making sense of communities in distress. The conclusion is notable at the end of these chapters: *'the support, wisdom, insight and worldviews of our co-travellers are vital, as is their critique of our work. In this collegial process, we are each holding bits of a whole, that none of us can fully see, all becoming more than what we currently are'* (p. 84).

The fourth and final story as told by Fiona Caniglia and Pam Bourke, in separate chapters and from similar yet different perspectives, traces the history of urban renewal in inner Brisbane suburbs, most notably New Farm/Teneriffe, and the work of the New Farm Neighbourhood Centre in engaging disadvantaged residents in dialogue with government. As with earlier chapters, the need to set out the historical context is clear, with this providing understanding of the often hostile climate into which community development workers wade when they have yet to spend the necessary time building relationships with people who have local knowledge and history. The account provided of the growth of community capacity in these areas is testament to the power within community to ignite when under threat from external sources. The importance of self-reliance was highlighted in the concluding comment that *'building strong local participatory groups and organisations that are not solely dependent on government is essential if communities are to have a say in managing their future and continuing to find a place for those people who become the victims of so-called 'progress''* (p. 110).

The final chapter of this book, the last seven pages, has been dedicated by the editors to a reflexive narrative of their own processes of insight and self-reflection. As a group process, each person drew an image of their narrative, and these then provided a collective analysis of development processes. This chapter contains powerful imagery that leaves the reader in no doubt that community development practice demands rigorous attention to the bigger story and those engaged in this work do need to do so in a spirit of collegial collaboration and partnership.

This book is, in itself, an example of development practice, and should take its place proudly in the libraries and homes of students of community work practice, educators of development principles, and general community members who want a reminder of what can happen when people connect, build relationships, and take on issues that seem overwhelming when looked at from an individual perspective, but become much more manageable when seen from the perspective of more than one.

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