Building knowledge from the practice of local communities

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Theory/Practice: an unnatural divide

Many scholars feel that there is an ongoing debate in trying to bridge the division between how researchers understand and frame the field of community building, and how those **engaged** in the work of community building understand and frame the field (Amulya and McDowell 2003). We would argue that such a division between theory builders and practitioners is, at best, false and at worst malicious. It is a division that privileges the knowledge of those involved in developing theory over that of people involved in practice. When abstract reasoning is offered as the primary means by which we can understand the world, knowledge that resides in practice and experience is often devalued. The voices, knowledge, and understanding that emerge from what Carol Gilligan and others refer to as 'other ways of knowing' (Gilligan 1993) is marginalized. The integration of the type of knowledge that arises from research that is 'formal' and taught in academic institutions, with the type of knowledge that resides in the work and minds of local practitioners, is critical for improving society because it brings together two complementary views of the world.

Of course, the world is not so easily divided between practitioners and theoreticians. Instead of a divide between theory and practice, one can instead see the world as consisting of work. Every one works and through their work (or experience) everyone creates theories about how the world works. Some forms of work have highly developed methodologies for investigating, testing, and sharing the knowledge and theories that emerge from the work. This is the case of researchers, academics, etc. Others, particularly in the case of development practitioners, have limited time and resources for investigating and documenting the knowledge that they gain from their practice. This type of practice-based knowledge is more intuitive, pragmatic and tacit. For example, community residents with decades of experience working on prisoner re-entry often do not have access to the appropriate tools and methods for investigating, testing, uncovering and identifying the knowledge and theories that emerge from their work. Yet their knowledge is a way of understanding the world that is invaluable for re-imagining the possibilities for creating a fair, just and equitable society. They need tools for investigating and documenting their own knowledge so that they can use it to further advance their own work on the ground, inform policy-making, and share it with others working on similar causes.

What methodologies or processes can community practitioners use to uncover, identify and value the knowledge that they have gained from their work? At the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Center for Reflective Community Practice (CRCP), the primary approach to answering this question has been through what Ceasar McDowell, Director of CRCP, calls *disruptive design and facilitation*. The term disruptive refers to the creation of environments that upset those stereotypes and habits of mind that limit one's ability to be self-reflective, empathetic and open to change. A disruptive environment helps people become aware of, and even question, their mental models and assumptions about the way the world works. Over the past four years CRCP has developed a reflection methodology, referred to as the Critical Moments Reflection process, which aims to create

this type of disruptive environment to support practitioners in uncovering, building and valuing the knowledge that they have generated from their practice.

Philosophy behind the Critical Moments Reflection Methodology

The principles of CRCP's Critical Moments methodology are grounded in the center's experience that practitioners will fully engage with a reflective learning process if the issues of ownership, authority and power over their knowledge are addressed in the design and execution of the process. For CRCP, this means that a knowledge-building and learning from practice process has to be driven by the practitioners' own questions and analysis of the stories from their experience, and the results of this work have to be owned by the practitioners. A focus on learning supports effective cross-groups dialogue. These principles inform the design and implementation of all of the CRCP knowledge-building activities.

The objective in each of these activities and experiences is to create awareness in the practice of community development by enabling the practitioner to question and confront deep-rooted biases and assumptions about people or groups that influence outcomes for communities. This internalized awareness has helped community practitioners develop the ability to incorporate more nuanced information, community wisdom, knowledge and personal experiences in the course of community action. It strengthens the capacity to improvise and innovate during the process of community development itself, and enhances community practitioners' capacity to respond to complexity in deeply introspective ways, by discouraging impulsive or simplistic theory building. Engaging in focused reflection can be critical for expanding creative energy, exploring and shifting mindsets, and for producing meaningful learning and new insights about political dynamics, technology, economic development, and other areas of community empowerment.

How does the Critical Moments Reflection Process work?
The Critical Moment Reflection process may be conducted in groups of 12 to 15 people from a variety of sectors of society or organizations who are working together to create positive change in a community or in particular types of communities. These people (also referred to as community practitioners), may be community residents, government officials, volunteers and/or NGO employees.

The Critical Moments Reflection process traditionally consists of four steps:

1. *Setting the frame and the inquiry question*
First, because it is vital for the participants to construct their own reflection processes, the participants set the frame (events and time period) and identify the inquiry questions that would guide their reflection. The inquiry question is posed as a question to which if the answer were known, it would advance the participants' sense of efficacy in their work. For instance, a group of participants may frame the following as an inquiry question: "What opportunities do we have in our work to facilitate the transfer of leadership in our community?" These participants may have raised this question because they understood that without a means of bringing new people into leadership roles, the community would lose many of the institutions it had created.

2. *Naming of critical moment*

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Second, participants name, from their own individual perspectives, their 'critical events' that occurred throughout the set time frame. These critical events or moments are experiences, both positive and/or negative, that have been important in advancing or setting back people's work. As shown in Figure 1 below, these critical moments are shared (and graphically mapped on a timeline) with the entire group.

3. *Selection of critical moments to be analyzed*
Third, the group then selects the critical moments that they believe would offer the most insight into the inquiry question(s).

4. *Lessons and Implications*
Lastly, the participants tell their in-depth stories of the selected critical moments, and then analyze these stories as a group in order to identify lessons learned, and implications for answering the inquiry questions and moving their work forward.

Figure 1: Critical Moments timeline

It generally takes a small group of ten participants, two and a half days to go through the entire process. If there are multiple small groups participating in a reflection, a half day is required at the beginning for the full group to come together, and then an additional full day at the end in order to create the space for the groups to share and reflect with each other on the knowledge that they uncovered during the individual group sessions.

To illustrate how this type of awareness and knowledge building happens, it is useful to provide a concrete example from our reflection work with communities in Latin America.

Applying the Critical Moments Reflection methodology in Latin America

CRCP has applied this methodology over the past four years in a variety of settings both in the USA and Latin America. Over the last 6 months, CRCP, in partnership with the Interaction Institute for Social Change (IISC), has been working with Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere, Inc (CARE) on a project that aims to understand how to support knowledge building among groups in society working to improve quality of life in marginalized communities. The collaborative process that CARE is undertaking, with the assistance of

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CRCP/IISC, engages a range of stakeholders, including staff from CARE Atlanta headquarters and several Latin American country offices, as well as members from communities of practice in a reflection process to examine the assumptions guiding their practice and to articulate the learning and questions arising from significant events and shifts in their work.

As part of the work with CARE, a three-day reflection session was held in Comayagua, Honduras with seven communities of practice from Honduras, Nicaragua and Guatemala. These seven communities of practice consisted of community residents, government officials and NGO workers that have been working together on specific issues in geographically defined communities. Four of these communities focused on education, one on water and sanitation, one on participatory governance, and one on agriculture. Approximately 30 community members participated in this reflection.

There were two important moments in the reflection session:

1. *Individual Group Reflections: identification of Critical Moments, storytelling and lessons from critical moments (two and a half days)*
Divided in small groups according to projects, the participants had the opportunity to individually reflect on their own experiences and share stories among each other about the different moments that they recognized as improving or hindering their roles in their community project. Visual aids are very important during this process. The stories and findings were recorded on large chart paper so that everyone could refer to them during and after the discussions. An interactive process with index cards and timelines kept the process dynamic and engaging.

Figure 2: Individual Group Session

2. *Collective and Supportive Reflections: Presentations of the Critical Moment analysis and lessons from presentations (1 day)*
Following the individual group reflections, the different groups participating in the reflection had an opportunity to share what they learned about what they knew with the other groups. Retelling their critical moments, their stories and the lessons was important because it enabled the groups to see their stories from a different perspective. Peers engaged in listening and critiquing the outcomes of the individual reflections contributed to the further deepening of the presenters' reflection. There is a different type of rigor in the analysis of the information presented and a different set of skills that is needed for people to engage in this type of analysis. Both presenters and listeners engaged in a type

of learning and sharing that helped them uncover a more collective knowledge and deepen the reflection of their own work. After the presentations and discussions, the smaller groups reconvened to discuss what they had learned not only about the presentations, but also about the reflection process as a whole.

Figure 3: Collective Reflection

The story from one Community
In the case of one community of practice, the participants identified a period of inactivity in their project (starting a month after the announcement of an international award and ended three months later with the summoning of all project leaders) as a critical moment. Although everybody in the group agreed that this event was significant since it had slowed down their work considerably, there was no clear consensus as to why this had happened. With the support and probing of facilitators, the group was able to examine its own group dynamics, members' individual and collective expectations, and the ways in which outsiders interact with the community of practice and influence its work. They were able to better understand how they work together, and the ways in which they support each other (or not).   This reflection enabled the group to identify various factors that caused the period of inactivity in the project. One such factor was the main leader's loss of motivation. Through a series of guided inquiries based on the *exhaustion of the whys*[1] approach*,* the participants came to realize the high degree of dependency that they had on their main leader.   They recognized that they lacked a sense of shared ownership in the project.   This increased awareness about their lack of shared ownership in the project led them to an even deeper level of inquiry, in which they explored why they were unable to take control of the project and organize activities during the period in which their leader lost motivation. The deeper understanding of the period of inactivity around their leader's loss of motivation allowed them to derive lessons that would help them move their work forward. Some of the lessons that they uncovered were:

• Incorporate periodic meetings to review progress and program activities to ensure accountability and continuity in the work, regardless of the level of involvement of the

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[1] The *exhaustion of the whys* approach is a technique that facilitators use to encourage people to identify, and at times even question, the mental models that influence their actions or interpretations of situations. Through a series of questions focused on uncovering why people do what they do, facilitators lead people to explain the reasoning behind their decisions, opinions or perceptions, and thus obtain a deeper understanding of the experiences or situations being discussed.

leaders. These meetings will prevent dispersion of the group, community disjointing and project delay.

- Each member of the community has to assume his/her own responsibility, which should be clearly defined to promote shared leadership, a factor that is imperative for the project to be sustainable.
- The project should be an opportunity to prepare future leaders, which means that the present leader has to learn how to delegate responsibilities.

It is worth mentioning that the project community described above was divided into two smaller groups for the Critical Moments Reflection process due to the large number of community members who participated in the event. Initially, project members were apprehensive about being divided into two reflection groups and feared that different outcomes from each group could divide them.

After going through the individual group reflection process and presentations, they came together, presented their respective work to one another and grouped their critical moments onto one timeline. One group had focused on the early stages of the project while the other group had analyzed recent events. Seeing all the different critical moments together in one timeline and upon reflecting on the similarities and differences in their groups' work, they came to appreciate that they had learned so much more about their work by acknowledging different perspectives on the project. The main leader, who had been a participant in one of the groups, acknowledged his own attitude with regards to the project (including his loss of motivation) and by sharing his feelings and emotions with the larger project group, a much deeper understanding of their work took place.

It is important to note that the critical moments Reflection in Comayagua helped uncover a type of community-based knowledge that went beyond the community's technical knowledge. For example, in the case of the aforementioned community, which has traditionally been recognized in the past for its school management and pedagogical strategies, the community uncovered a new type of knowledge during the reflection in Comayagua. This new type of knowledge related to the community's political maneuvering to gain municipal support, parents' engagement strategies, as well as leadership needs.

Challenges of the Critical Moments methodology

Although the Critical Moments Reflection process is a very open and flexible process it has some challenges. Perhaps the most important challenge is the time required to conduct the reflection process. As mentioned previously, a full critical moments reflection session requires a minimum of two and a half days for one group, and three and half days for multiple groups. CRCP has learned through previous experiences that anything less can severely compromise the process. In today's fast paced world, however, time for reflecting, rather than doing, is extremely scarce. It is very difficult for people to set aside sufficient time from their busy schedules to reflect on their work.
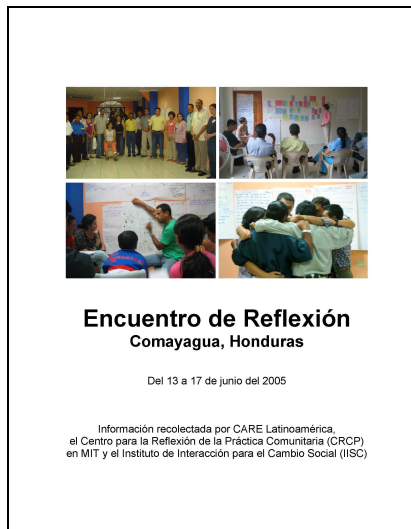
A second important challenge is the skill set that is necessary to facilitate these types of reflection processes. To help people gain new perspectives on themselves and their work, it is necessary for the facilitators to engender an environment of trust; one in which people are able to share their stories openly and be receptive to deep inquiry into their analyses. Facilitators must

also have the capacity to make meaning out of people's stories in ways that are not limited by their own mental models. To do this, facilitators place close attention to not only what people say, but also the way they say it. People's word choices, as well as their non-verbal ways of communicating, are vital inputs to the meaning making process that the facilitator is responsible for leading. Often, it is through these more subtle communication mechanisms that the assumptions that lead people to do what they do can be uncovered. Facilitators need to learn to probe in ways that disrupt the stereotypes and habits of mind that limit people's ability to be self-reflective and open to change. Yet this type of disruptive probing cannot be too extreme since people shut down if they are pushed too far beyond their comfort zones. Creating the right balance in this probing process is difficult and requires substantial practice. To build some of the skills required, facilitators need to experience the process themselves, observe it and engage in coaching techniques that help improve their listening skills.

The third challenge relates to the power dynamics that inevitably arise from status (leader/non-leader), gender, class, age, education, race/ethnicity differentials in any group of diverse individuals. True knowledge building can only happen if everyone in a group is willing and able to share and make meaning of their experiences. If some people in a group are not able or willing to share, opportunities for learning during a reflection are limited. Some recommendations to work around power dynamic challenges include prior meetings with group leaders to encourage them to talk about their own experiences. Leaders should be able to open up to the group and become vulnerable. CRCP has learned that, once leaders take this first step, other participants are more likely to follow.

A fourth challenge is documentation. Because the knowledge that is generated is owned by the group engaged in reflection, it is important to document the stories, critical moments and lessons that emerge throughout the process so that it can be given back to the group for their own future use. The documentation of such large quantities of information requires a tremendous amount of management skills and information processing. The facilitators have to be able to document the information in a way that the community can refer back to it. One particular challenge of this documentation process is its reliance on the written word since many communities have strong oral traditions and/or low literacy rates. Alternative ways to document the process are though video, sound files, drawings, diagrams, pictures, etc. One person minimum should be dedicated to documenting the process through charts and a second one should be in charge of taking pictures and recording video. Other ways to document the process while interacting with participants are: timelines with index cards, forms, diaries, and other supporting materials that also capture emotions and thoughts, etc. A binder with pictures of all the charts produced during the event was presented to each community, country office and management representative that participated in the reflection process (see figure 4). It also included session materials and summaries per group. In addition, a collection of DVDs with videos and sound files were also presented.

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Figure 4: Title page of Reflection Event binder

Cultural Issues

Finally, the work of CRCP and IISC in Latin America has shown that cultural issues present important challenges to knowledge building processes in the development context.

Culture can significantly impact the process of helping communities uncover what they know through reflection. Subtle differences between facilitator and communities and even among community members can delay a process that is meant to be dynamic and interactive. One factor that enhances those differences is language. The following example from our work in Latin America illustrates this particular point. CRCP and IISC facilitation team was in charge of coordinating the reflection process and training CARE staff to help carry it out. However, not everybody in the main facilitation team had full proficiency in Spanish. Although efforts were made to provide for full translation services for the whole event, it was soon discovered that there was a critical communication gap that hindered the ability of the main facilitators to quickly respond to stories and comments made by the participants. While simultaneous translation was capturing sentences and words, it was not capturing the true meaning behind the stories, which was embedded in the people's choice of words, their emphasis on particular words, their pauses and inflections, and other elements that carry the emotions of participants. Without these subtle messages, it became difficult for the facilitator to guide the process.

Conclusion

The critical moments reflection process provides practitioners with the opportunity to reflect on their experiences identify and value what they know. It is a methodology that generates a high degree of trust among practitioners and this is useful in helping them capture some of the knowledge that they hold. To create the conditions in which practitioners can allow themselves to reflect requires the disruption of the structural and psycho/social barriers that operate a priori for each group. Everyone who participates in this process, including the facilitators, need to remain open to being changed by the process itself. All involved in the reflection process will have their mental models changed, expanded, shifted and opened.

The Latin American case shows that the methodology helps strengthen the capacity of practitioners to improvise and innovate during the process of community development itself, and enhance community practitioners' capacity to respond to complexity in deeply introspective ways, by discouraging impulsive or simplistic theory building. Engaging in focused reflection is critical for expanding creative energy, exploring and shifting mindsets, and for producing meaningful learning and new insights about political dynamics, technology, economic development, and other areas of community development.

We began this article with a claim that there is an unnatural division between theory and practice, and that the knowledge held by practitioners is often ignored and discounted. The critical moments reflection process presented in this article provides one powerful mechanism for (1) helping practitioners learn and uncover what they know through their practice, and (2), contributing to integrate knowledge from theory with knowledge that resides in practice. Without this knowledge from practice, we are all ill equipped to meet the challenges of building a just and fair world.

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Abstract

This article begins with a theoretical view of why and how knowledge from poor communities and disenfranchised people is not only valid but also, perhaps, unique. The authors propose that there is a particular form of knowledge that resides in communities through their practice and that local knowledge, if tapped into, constitutes an important asset for development. The article discusses the origins of the Critical Moments Reflection methodology developed by MIT's

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Center for Reflective Community Practice (CRCP). Using one case from CRCP's work with the Interaction Institute for Social Change (IISC) in Latin America, the article discusses not only how this methodology has been used to support the identification, generation and valuing of local knowledge but also what challenges it faces. Finally, the article presents some of the challenges and cultural issues that need to be tended to when trying to support the generation of local knowledge in a development context.

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