Theory to Practice

Exploring the Meaning of Learning and Community

Jennifer Nielsen

Abstract

This research on creating and re-creating community proposes that creating community is a central role of adult educators and challenges us to reframe how we conceptualize and engage in it; to move beyond constructs like proximity, alikeness, structure, and hierarchy that have traditionally delineated community and view it through new and varied perspectives. As we advance technologically and become more globalized, this is becoming more than something interesting to conceptualize—it's becoming necessary.

Understanding Community

Understanding community can be a difficult task as it is a construct that can be viewed through many different lenses. Throughout my literature review, several social theorists offered concepts that were helpful in framing different ways of understanding community.

Gemeinschaft and Gesellshaft (Community and Society)

Literature regarding community often refers to the work of German sociologist, Ferdinand Tönnies. He described two distinct types of organized human interaction: *gemeinschaft* and *gesellshaft*.

Gemeinschaft is commonly understood as "community" and *gesellschaft* is understood as "society." Tönnies says that *gemeinschaft* or community is a tighter and more cohesive entity with qualities of intimacy, emotional bonds, mutuality, and most importantly, solidarity. He likened the characteristics of community to those you might find within family or kinship but allowed that other things like place and belief could

Jennifer Nielsen works in the Office of External Affairs as a Community Outreach Administrator for RAND, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

inspire community as well. *Gesellschaft* or society, on the other hand, is a group in which participants within the group are motivated to take part in the group purely by self-interest. *Gesellschaft* is generally seen as more transitory, fragmented, and impersonal. He saw the two constructs not as mutually exclusive, but as coexisting and reciprocal—no group was either purely *gemeinschaft* or *gesellschaft*, but a hybrid (Tönnies, 1974).

Social Capital

There has been concern for some time among social theorists that community is deteriorating and quickly becoming a thing of the past. In *Bowling Alone* (2000), Robert Putnam warns that our stock of social capital—the very fabric of our connections with each other—has plummeted, impoverishing our lives and communities. Putnam (2000) suggests that changes in work, family structure, age, suburban life, television, computers, women's roles, and other factors have contributed to this decline.

This idea of social capital is important to the discussion of community because the central idea behind it is that relationships matter; there is value in maintaining and growing social networks for individuals and communities. Positive relationships within networks allow individuals and communities to work together, provide resources, and develop a sense of belonging and trust. Social capital has power because it facilitates collective action. Some research proposes that there has been too much emphasis placed on strengthening individuals and communities in order to make them more independent; proposing instead that perhaps the goal should be to strengthen by promoting "interdependence" by developing social capital. "Building social capital requires strengthening the social connections among people in a community, connections that are necessary for people to organize themselves and address their collective needs and problems" (Wehlage & White, 1995, p. 2). Wehlage and White (1995) contend that language used to describe successful organizations and communities often emphasizes independence as functional while dependence is seen as dysfunctional; this fails to take into account the inherent interdependence of citizens and organizations within a community. Interdependence can be an important factor in cohesion and success.

Examining principles of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellshaft*, social capital and interdependence provide interesting ways to explore the idea of

community but a clear definition remains elusive. Communities can be explained as those of place, value, interest, practice, communion, and even attachment. Cohen (1985) argues that communities are best approached as communities of meaning. He says that community is integral in generating a sense of belonging and the reality of community lies in its members' perception of the vitality of its culture. "People construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning and a referent of their identity" (Cohen, 1985, p. 118). Cohen also points out that community involves both similarity and difference in that members of a group have something in common with each other; and the thing held in common distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other possible groups (Cohen, 1985).

For the purposes of further examining community as it pertains to learning and education, I found the following definition quite useful: community refers to the sustainable connection between individuals brought about by a shared interest, sense of purpose, or need (Stein & Imel, 2002).

Learning in Community

"Learning in community can be described as individuals coming together to exercise control and influence over the direction, content, and purposes of their learning" (Stein & Imel, 2002). The hallmarks of a learning community are a strong group identity, expectations for participation and contribution, and working toward the greater good (Ulrich, 1998). The types of learning communities that the authors above describe are notions of a community of value rather than a community of proximity or of other social constructs. Stein and Imel (2002) describe several unique properties of community learning including its "voluntary nature of participation, the sharing of teaching and learning roles by the members, and the change in the community and the individual members that is brought about by collective meanings and actions."(p. 1) They go on to say that they believe that learning in community expresses the desire of adults to engage with and learn from one another.

Distinguishing Community Education from Adult Education

The terms community education and adult education are very similar, to the point that they are often used interchangeably. Four criteria that help to make a distinction between the two terms are identified in Dean, Murk, & Prete (2000):

1. In community education, community serves as the context for
    the learning activity.
2. The goals of community education are to improve the quality
    of life for community members as well as to enhance the
    community as a whole.
3. Education is seen as a process to accomplish these goals as
    well as an outcome of the process (that is, people in the com
    munity use educational programs to become more educated).
4. Education is a primary means of achieving goals for improv-
    ing quality of life in the community (p. 29).

Three types of outcomes related to community education were iden-
tified by Dean and Dowling (1987). They include:

•   People-related outcomes, which refer to what is learned by
    the people involved in community education (organizers or
    clients).
•   Organizational outcomes, which refer to the development,
    maintenance, enhancement, and impact of the actual organiza-
    tion through which the community education activity occurs.
•   Programmatic outcomes, which refer to the actual educational
    goals such as career training, basic education or neighborhood
    improvement (p. 81).

Frameworks of Learning in Community

Stephen Brookfield's (1983) *Adult Learners, Adult Education and
the Community*, is an often-referenced resource in the discussion of
learning outside conventional educational settings. He proposes that
learning in community has certain specific features:

•   It is deliberate and purposeful in that the adults concerned
    are seeking to acquire knowledge and skills.
•   Such purpose and intention may not, however, always

    be marked by closely specified goals. Learning may be
    apparently haphazard and therefore unsuccessful at times.
•   It occurs outside of classrooms and designated educational
    institutions and does not follow the strict timetable of the
    academic year.
•   It receives no institutional accreditation or validation.

- It is voluntary, self-motivated and self-generating. Adults choose to engage in this learning, although the circumstances occasioning that choice may be external to the learner's control. (p. 15)

Brookfield (1983) points out that it's important that we acknowledge that the term learning is a gerund (a word which can stand as a noun or verb). He uses it in its active sense. For the purposes of his explanation, learning refers to the process of acquiring skills and knowledge, rather than an internal change of consciousness. He also points out that just because learning in community is often informal doesn't mean that it's not purposeful:

"Although learning occurring outside schools, colleges and universities may be unplanned and accidental, there must be much that is purposeful and deliberate… the circumstances occasioning learning may often be outside the individual's control for example and enforce job change, childbirth, conscription. However, the individual who decides that the acquisition of certain skills and knowledge is essential to managing such crises and changes successfully is behaving in a highly purposeful manner (Brookfield, 1983, pp. 12-13).

While I found Brookfield's features of learning in community helpful as a guiding framework, he is not without his critics. Some common critiques of this framework are:

- That it's limited to the acquisition of skills and knowledge and doesn't include values and attitudes.
- Community is not clearly defined—it would seem that, according to his framework, community could include anything that is simply not school.

A History of Learning Communities

As communities face upheavals and change, education is often a response to dealing with these changes. Hugo (2002) pointed out:

"Much of the U.S. discourse on adult learning in community today is a legacy of the Progressive Era, an intense period of social reform spanning the 1880s through the 1920s. In the face of a world war, increased immigration, scientific advancements, and social unrest at

home and abroad, Americans experienced a number of cultural dis-
locations; as disillusionment, frustration, fear, cynicism, and icono-
clasm grew, it was a time of reappraisal and change" (p. 10).

Hugo (2002) also points out that there are some major hindrances
to clearly identifying a history of learning in communities. One is the
difficulty in definition – as we have previously discussed, without clear
definitions of terms like learning, education, and community, it is a mon-
umental task to identify occurrences of learning in community through-
out history. In addition, because of their often informal setting, learning
communities are not naturally pre-disposed to written documentation.
Education may not have been the primary focus of the community, but a
bi-product and therefore not recorded as a learning community.

Hugo (2002) refers to Brookfield's way of historically classifying
community learning groups. His classification included:

- Autonomous Learning Groups. These groups included reli-
  gious, literary, scientific, agricultural, and philosophical soci-
  eties; groups that were part of efforts to encourage the quick
  spread of useful knowledge to the general population. Hugo
  (2002) offers the example of the Junto—an elite reading and
  discussion circle started by Benjamin Franklin in 1727. Junto
  groups still operate today—a remarkable testament to the stay-
  ing power of such learning groups. Hugo (2002) proposes that
  such sustainability can be attributed to the "commitment of a
  group of core members to the ongoing socialization of new
  members into the group."(p. 13) Organized voluntary educa-
  tional groups like this, often referred to as communities of prac-
  tice, still form today.
- Community Development Groups. These groups are commu-
  nity-based initiatives, designed by adult educators to improve
  or revitalize communities. Hugo (2002) characterizes them as
  having a focus on real-life problems identified by community
  residents, a coordination of service delivery, and community
  collaboration. These groups were often formed in response to
  industrialization, urbanization, and centralization.
  An example of this type of group could be a public forum.
- Community Action Groups. Hugo (2002) characterized these
  types of learning communities as committed to identifying un-
  derlying problems and solving them by taking action informed

by new understandings. She says that while other learning communities were about encouraging a more informed citizenry or modifying social behavior, community action groups are about upsetting the status quo, not about restoring harmony but about social transformation. Growth in community action groups often coincides with large-scale social movements such as the labor movement and civil rights movement. Often cited examples of such learning communities in the adult education literature are Myles Horton's Highlander Folk School and Paulo Freire's work around literacy in Brazil.

Common Themes within Learning in Community
Stein & Imel (2002) identify four common themes that run through the literature regarding learning in community:

1. Place is important. Adult learners voluntarily create learning spaces related to the time and place in which problems are situated. It is important to note that these spaces can be, but do not have to be, physical spaces.
2. Learning content relates to the community's daily life. Learning in a community produces content situated in the daily life concerns of the members. The experience of learning in a community creates collective knowledge owned by the members. Learning is cooperative, purposeful, and designed to strengthen a group's ability to learn from and apply wisdom to everyday life situations. A reoccurring phrase throughout the literature is that "learning communities serve as laboratories of adults' life concerns."
3. Knowledge is locally produced. Learning in community encourages citizens to produce local knowledge. Knowledge is created by the group, shared with the group, and arises from interactions within the group with a common situation.
4. Learning communities may be powerful structures. It is important to remain aware of how learning communities reflect the power and politics of the broader society in which they are located. And when we talk about belonging and inclusion to a community it is important to remember the exclusion that can be a by-product. The word community generally elicits positive reaction and feelings, but it can negatively impact those who are excluded.

The Future of Community and Learning in Community

In the chapter on creating and re-creating community in the 2010 volume of the *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education*, Wiessner, Sheared, Lari, Kucharczhk, & Flowers say that in the past proximity, alikeness, structure, and hierarchy determined and characterized how we operated and acted within forms of community and they use the chapter to challenge us to reframe our perceptions of community.

As our world changes, it is necessary for us, especially as educators, to recognize the fluidity of the concept and the transitional nature of community. And as we progress, our new contexts will demand new conceptualizations of what community is, what it can be, and how it can be created. It will be important for educators not to subscribe to the idea that community is a thing of the past and instead, embrace the idea that community is a fluid construct and reject static definitions of society and community. It is necessary to be open and ready to recognize and foster community in new and unexpected places.

(Wiessner et al., 2010) put forth that adult educators have the ability to intentionally create community by embracing the following elements:

1. Embracing varied perspectives on community.
2. Embracing diversity within community.
3. Embracing community as daily practice.

Wiessner et al. (2010) advise that adult educators should become more intentional about growing and developing community together; that community will become what we make of it or what we choose to foster and recognize.

Ralf St. Clair (1998) believes that the notion of community can be a useful tool to examine adult education, but the value of this approach depends on clearly breaking down and understanding the term. He suggests that we look at community as a form of relationships rather than an entity:

This approach shows how community serve to regulate behavior and inform values. It also demonstrates some ways in which analysis of the underlying relationships provides insigh into adult education practice (St. Clair, 1998, p. 5).

Ulrich (1998) proposes that one new way of looking at community could be forming communities of value rather than communities of proximity. He proposes six practices for creating communities of value:

1. Forge a strong and distinct identity. Communities of value have clear, strong, and distinct identities that give meaning to members and distinctness to nonmembers.
2. Establish clear rules of inclusion.
3. Share information across boundaries.
4. Create serial reciprocity.
5. Use symbols, myths, and stories to create and sustain values
6. Manage enough similarity so that the community feels familiar.

In anticipating the community of the future, de Ayala (1998) encourages us as educators to look at globalization not as a threat to community, but as an opportunity for a human or world community. He goes on to say that he believes the notion of a dying or diminishing community to be false. He identifies the following ways in which he sees community growing and changing:

- A surge of voluntarism for global and non-governmental organizations that has made nonprofit institutions and organizations a vital sector in many countries.
- The growing interest of corporate culture in social responsibility.
- The growing prominence of issues that have little to do with power or the creation of wealth and everything to do with the quality of life on the planet, such as care of the environment.

de Ayala (1998) contends that new and old forms of community have been rallying around such issues of rising importance and they don't necessarily look like communities traditionally have in the past.

As our definitions of community change and adapt, it also becomes necessary to look at how we function as educators within these new communities. In community education, where the ideal is a group of people that learns *with* one another, not necessarily *from* one another, if the need for the expertise of an adult educator is limited or absent, what might be our role? In addition to being accepting of different concepts of community, we will need to be more accepting of new roles, for example, acting as co-learners, group facilitators, etc. Our role may increasingly become about encouraging group learning without interfering in the learning (Stein & Imel, 2002) and managing external conditions to allow learning to occur.

Wiessner et al. (2010) advise that expanding the concept of community can be achieved by accepting the importance of commonality and diversity, its existence within boundless and shared spaces and by embracing its richness. They place the responsibility of sustaining existing communities as well as continually identifying new communities and opportunities for new communities at the feet of adult educators—no small task for certain, but a necessity for ensuring the continuance of meaningful and successful communities and an informed and educated citizenry.

References

Brookfield, S. (1983). *Adult learners, adult education and the community.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Cohen, A. P. (1985) *The symbolic construction of community*, London: Tavistock.

de Ayala, J. (1998). Anticipating the community of the future. In F. Hesselbein, M. Golsdmith, R. Beckhard, & R. Schubert (Eds.), *Community of the future* (pp.155-166). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Dean, G.J., & Dowling, W. (1987). Community development: An adult education model. *Adult Education Quarterly*, *37*(2), 78-89.

Dean, G., Murk, P., & Del Prete, T. (2000). *Enhancing organizational effectiveness in adult and community edcuation.* Malabar, FL: Krieger.

Hugo, J. (2002). Learning community history. In D. Stein & S. Imel (Eds.), *Adult learning in community*. New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, No. 95. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Stein, D., & Imel, S. (2002). Themes and threads. In D.A. Stein & S. Imel (Eds.), *Adult learning in community*. New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education. No. 95. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

St. Clair, R. (1998). On the commonplace: Reclaiming community in adult education. *Adult Education Quarterly. 49*(1), 5–14.

Tönnies, F. (1974). Gemeinschaft and gesellshaft. In C. Bell & H. Newby (Eds.), *The sociology of community* (pp.7-12). New York: Cass.

Ulrich, D. (1998). Six practices for creating communities of value, not proximity. In F. Hesselbein, M. Golsdmith, R. Beckhard, & R. Schubert (Eds.), *Community of the future* (pp.155-166). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Wehlage, G., & White, J. (1995), Citizens, clients, and consumers: Building social capital. *Center on Organization and Restructuing of Schools*, 1-32.

Wiessner, C.A., Sheared, V. Lari, P., Kucharczhk, S., & Flowers, D. (2010). Creating and re-creating community. In C. Kassworm, A. Rose, & J. Ross-Gordon (Eds.), *Handbook of adult and continuing education* (pp. 431-441). Los Angeles: Sage.