Learning to Change: A Grassroots Program Planning Model

John Egan
University of British Columbia

Abstract: This program planning model seeks to mitigate a gap in current planning models found in adult education literature, and to represent grassroots programming as a vital area of practice. This model incorporates the instrumental, contextual and ethical dimensions of program planning.

Contemporary program planning theory seek to provide a model by which any program planning experience can be articulated—regardless of context, practitioner or participants. Given the broad spectrum of human experience the extent to which any single model will fit all planning processes—regardless of context, actors and objectives—is dubious. Embedded in current models are assumptions about the planner, the learners, and what constitutes a “genuine” program.

Most program planning models offer valuable information by which current practitioners may reflect on their own practices, and by which novice planners may avoid hours of unnecessary guesswork. Nonetheless, current program planning models do not reflect the full range of programmers’ work. In particular, the efforts of planners whose communities are marginalized and excluded—communities of colour, women, gay men & lesbians, ethnic and religious minorities and the disabled—follow practices that do not fit neatly into the codification of these models. As such, their work is not adequately represented in the literature.

In this paper I offer a grassroots program planning model, one which embraces the work of activists as a unique mode of adult education program planning.

Review of the Literature

Most of the canon of planning literature in adult education has it origins traceable to Ralph W. Tyler’s generalist Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction (1969). Both Houle (1996) and Knowles (1980) narrow their focus to the practice of adult education, but each model represent a more nuanced articulation of Tyler’s work. Caffarella’s (1994) and Sork’s (1997) models take the instrumental aspects of planning emphasized in Tyler’s, Houle’s and Knowles’ work, and bring consideration of the planning context and the ethics embedded in the planning process directly into their models. Cervero and Wilson’s critical perspective of program planning (1994; 1996) offers an unique approach in that it eschews the instrumental nature of the planning process—“what to do and how to do it”—instead focussing on the dynamics of power and interests in the planning experience. Though the questions they examine are important, for novice planners their decision to exclude technical issues renders their work vague and abstract. The extent to which their work constitutes a veritable planning model is questionable.

Freire’s popular education (1986) represents a learner-centered model for adult basic education programs delivered at the grassroots level. However, its design relies upon
“experts” with training in traditional social science disciplines to determine program content and instructional strategies, making the practice of popular education truly a specific application of traditional, rational planning. The objectification of learners via the process of *conscientization* (p. 90) is as doctrinaire as those presented in the other models, which fall within a more liberal notion of adult education. Any difference is more in terms of ideology than practice; all these models (including Freire’s) reifies a more knowledgeable planner over the learner.

What all these models have in common—and what limits their value to many activists engaging in grassroots community education—is their presumption of program planning as an activity which occurs or originates exclusively in formalized institutions or organizations. Granted, in community settings worthwhile, even vital endeavours are initiated in community centres, neighbourhood houses, or non-governmental organizations (NGOs). But many others emerge from the community itself, without institutional participation.

Across Canada and throughout the world citizens are engaged in programs designed and delivered locally. In various contexts, peers discuss their lives, aspirations, and challenges amongst one another; such discussions lead to more formal meetings, which themselves lead to plans of action. Almost always, whether the issues engaged are about schooling, the environment, civil rights, or staying healthy, people are learning from one another about how to improve their lives and about what (or who) impedes progress towards their goals. These nascent “small-p” projects—frequently local in scope but often large in their impact—are under-represented in the current body of program planning literature because their ad hoc, extra-institutional nature. The following *grassroots* model of program planning serves to mitigate this.

**A Model Rooted In Experience**

My own lived experiences exemplify the practices to which this model refers. My program planning experience began nearly 20 years ago, but this work’s almost always extra-institutional nature led me to discount its significance. Though I believed education to be a critical component of my activism towards social justice (among gay men and lesbians, substance abusers and mental health consumers), I never viewed myself as an educator, nor as a planner of adult education programs. But that is precisely what much of my work entailed: sorting out what could (and should) be done to improve marginalized peoples’ material experiences. Strategizing on how best to accomplish this occurred away from mainstream society’s institutions, which were often the perceived sources of the inequities against which we fought. In operating “on the outside”, my colleagues and I sacrificed funding possibilities, in order to create programs that were unencumbered by donor constraint. Our work relied on (unpaid) peer educators, and used emerging local knowledges (Foucault, p. 62).
A Grassroots Model

This model is based on an *a posteriori* understanding of what grassroots program planners do. It puts equal value on the instrumental, contextual and ethical dimensions of grassroots program planning. This model has six components: coalescence, strategizing, internal change, external change, evaluation and continuation/cessation. While from project to project each component may not be applicable (particularly internal and external change), each aspect delineates particular stages in the lifecycle of a grassroots program.

**Coalescence:** Coalescence often occurs “in the neighbourhood” or at venues within the community, including places of worship, schools, and community centres. In a shared context peers begin to discuss mutual interests or concerns—something needs to be changed, or something is missing. Such initially informal chats during normal social interactions inspire some members of the community to propose more formalized discussion.

**Strategizing:** Now gathered for the explicit purpose of formulating a plan of action, community members meet and consider their options. Whereas other planning models usually discuss this stage as needs assessment, in grassroots program planning the luxury of any formal process of need determination often is not tenable. Persons who are marginalized or excluded from the mainstream of society are usually too occupied with the day-to-day challenges of survival to be able to dedicate much time and energy needed for such structured activity. Instead, brainstorming possible actions to take are discussed, and goals identified. These goals fall into two categories: internal or external change.

**Internal change:** Actions to be taken wholly within the local context, and which do not require any sort of institutional involvement. Parents organizing study groups for their neighbourhood’s children, or setting up a volunteer committee to keep a street trash-free are two examples of programs geared towards internal change. Retention of local control in decision-making and implementation is much easier to maintain with programs like these, where little contact with outside bureaucracies is needed. Local objectives are prioritized, and can be rapidly implemented.

**External change:** Communities often need to pursue outside assistance for their issues. Permits may be required to host events, or funding for projects might need to be solicited. Some issues—such as those related to health and wellness—inevitable require the pursuit of services from government agencies. Seeking outside assistance usually necessitates bringing external stakeholders into the planning process; a more complex negotiation of interests can result in local priorities losing weight. With migration towards external change often come the normative practices of institutionally-based program planning.
Evaluation: In grassroots settings, formal evaluation methods are usually eschewed for more consensus-based measures: do we see things changing as we had hoped? What seems to work best? What could we do differently? Perhaps the most common strategy is the use of informal conversation between the planners and the participants. Conversation is less likely to inculcate any hierarchical power dynamics, and adapts well to participants’ time constraints.

Continuation or Cessation: Grassroots programs continue as long as they are perceived to be of value to the community they serve. They commonly operate on a limited basis, in response to a specific set of circumstances and stop when they are no longer seen as necessary, or when there is insufficient community support to sustain them. However, it is not unusual for established grassroots programs to eventually migrate to more formalized structures (like community centres and NGOs), where they are adapted to more standardized program planning paradigms.

Discussion

Why aren’t grassroots programs more prominently featured in program planning literature? Few of us would view this omission as a calculated, purposeful one. Certainly there is an under-representation of local knowledges in academe in general. But adult education’s canon claims a specific role in the mitigation of injustice; as such, the dearth of grassroots work in our literature is in some ways more troubling. But there are logistical and political reasons for this lack of representations.

Grassroots programs are usually “under the radar” of mainstream society and its institutions, including the university. While the location of these programs outside our purviews makes sense given the limited degree to which marginalized and excludes peoples’ realities appear in any disciplines literature, this positioning of these activities isn’t wholly circumstantial. Among activists the ability to program creatively, effectively and inexpensively—and, outside the institutions that exclude them—carries with it a certain hubris. Activists take certain pride in doing their work without the resources available in formal settings. By keeping their work out of the mainstream’s purview, grassroots planners keep their work “pure”, vis á vis uncorrupted.

As disinclined university-based adult education researcher may be to look for grassroots programming activity, so too are activists disinclined to draw attention to their work outside their own milieus. This reticence is quite pragmatic. In the contexts in which grassroots programs are planned and delivered, there are usually context-specific measures of program efficacy and value. If it good enough for the community, it is good enough.
A Need for Research

We know that grassroots programs provide vitally important services to underserved communities. But we are lacking data to explicate the nature of these programs, their lifecycles, and their place in adult education as a broader practice. Just as grassroots planners are perhaps wary of bringing their projects forward for scrutiny by academics, as researchers we should be scrutinous in how innovative methodological approaches could mitigate such concerns.

Grassroots activism is rooted in the principle of action; grassroots programs are oriented towards creating substantive change as quickly and straightforwardly as possible. This pragmatism makes many activists dubious of the value (and veracity) of lengthy ethnographic or quantitative inquiries. A research process that treats them as objects would be objectionable. More participatory methods, such as action research or participatory research, might better serve the interests of both researchers and study participants.

Notes

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References


