PRIMARY INFORMATION EXERCISES AS A MOTIVATIONAL METHOD FOR TEACHING THEORY AND PRACTICE
Lessons from the Shuswap Nation's SFU/SCES Community Economic Development Theory Course

>> >> >> << << <<

Stephen Ameyaw

Action research is defined as research conducted by and for a community for the purpose of bringing about change within that community. An outstanding feature of the debate on 'Action Research' is the overwhelming contribution of the 'Action Learning' process.

As noted by Bushe (1995), the difference between action learning and action research is more a matter of emphasis than kind. *Action research*, according to Winter (1986). is intended to change some aspects of how one practices in the field (teaching, learning, relating and making money). However, he argues that one engages in *action learning* to merely learn about something.

If one accepts the premise that action learning is a critical determinant to truly know about something, then recent developments in the literature with respect to participation, performance and motivation pose serious problems in action research. According to Altrichter (1992). there are concerns that the traditional model of conducting action research often focuses upon story telling, about the methodology, philosophy, principles of procedures and concrete cases of others' experiences of engaging in action research. This traditional model makes it difficult for action research to critically react to these challenges.

Based on my experience from research, teaching, project design and implementation, I argue that the 'action' component matters a lot and that the way and manner in which such action is derived underscores the effectiveness of the research or learning process. Recent advances in 'Appreciative Inquiry' as an organizational development intervention provides insights into new and better action processes by exploring the best of what is and has been

---

Dr. Stephen Ameyaw is a Research Associate of the Community Economic Development Centre, Simon Fraser University, specializing in community economic planning.

(Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Bushe, 1995). These writers have criticized the lack of useful theories generated by traditional action research studies. They argue that the gap between the method of action research and implicit theory of social organization are to blame. They contend that the interaction between action learning, and action research can generate positive, affirmative imagery in social change processes. They suggest that it is important to explore the best of what is and what has been, in an attempt to generate a collective image of a new, better future. The defining characteristic of action learning is that it produces an understanding that can only be gained from experience. Appreciative inquiry thus provides the best way to understand the past and the present, in an attempt to project the future.

Like many university lecturers, my experiences from action learning are multidimensional. Despite the fact that the class lecture is rigidly designed to fit a desired predetermined educational goal, I often interrupt the class to inject new perspectives, based on my assessments of the situations and outcomes of the lectures. There are many concepts including theories that can be conveyed more quickly, and accurately by a lecturer using the appreciative inquiry lecture format. Primary research exercises, affirmative projections, are effective participatory tools, particularly well suited for teaching community economic development.

During the Fall of 1994 I had a unique opportunity to teach a community economic development theory course to Simon Fraser University (SFU) students at the Harbour Centre Vancouver and Kamloops campuses in British Columbia (B.C.). Canada. The students at the Kamloops campus were primarily of First Nations origin, while those at the Harbour Centre campus primarily were of non-aboriginal descent. The students came from differing academic backgrounds and disciplines. Their interests were oriented towards practice and policy analysis. There was a combination of older and younger students; some were professionals returning to university to gain new insights in the field of CED while others were just continuing their education. All the students were genuinely interested in understanding the practical applications of theory and practice, but not the dynamics of abstract theory. The characteristics and makeup of the students presented an interesting pedagogical challenge. I found that genuine primary community research exercises, recollections of positive experiences and engaging in open dialogue and participation were excellent strategies for helping students understand the CED practice and theory course. At the same time, these strategies enhanced the students ability to master the basic theory essentials required for examining practical community projects and policy analysis.

This paper will first describe some pedagogical challenges that arose during the Fall of 1994, while I taught SFU post baccalaureate diploma students a CED theory and practice course. This paper will also explain, in general, why a traditional lecture course may not help students understand the relationship between theories and their practical applications. I described how to conduct genuine primary community research exercises. This included requiring students to recollect and present their significant experiences and learnings from the communities or organizations that they examined. A discussion of how these strategies could be used to meet the pedagogical challenges will be examined, by drawing on specific instances of student input. Finally, the merits of these strategies will be compared and contrasted with other standard teaching methods.

THE PEDAGOGICAL ISSUES

Theory and Application

In general, CED theory courses tend to treat primary or practical community research exercises as secondary to the exposition of theoretical concepts. Sometimes, lecturers use examples from books, case studies, journals and newspapers, to illustrate the applications of particular theoretical concepts. In most cases, they tend to use the examples to reinforce but not challenge the theories being presented. In CED theory courses, lecturers normally present theories and past case studies. They fail to regard theories as set of tools to be used for responding to questions required for examining current and future practical uses. Primary research exercises, however could provide an avenue for students to challenge the questionable theoretical assumptions in CED. Unfortunately, and conversely, CED theory courses tend to focus on theories themselves, and their practical applications are often perceived as being merely incidental. Therefore, primary community research exercises

provide a surer way for students to learn and understand CED and its practical applications.

The goal of a CED theory course is to teach students how to apply CED reasoning to particular CED-related questions and issues. In this case, the focus is on CED analysis, processes, and practical applications. One method of illustrating this intricate process is through theory and practice. However, the primary problem with presenting applications as a means for reinforcing the theories is that, sometimes it makes a one-to-one association between the theories and their applications. In most theory courses, examples are commonly selected because they are good illustrations of particular theoretical concepts, but they do little to help students learn the appropriate theories applicable to specific community problems.

Research and Learning Approaches

CED is fundamentally related to theory and practice. CED is also guided by theoretical concepts and analytical tools. Students are therefore required to develop the ability to examine practical research projects and collect qualitative and quantitative data. In most cases, this process involves a number of tasks, including determining the types of data to be collected and its relevance to the project or program. CED also involves utilizing the best available methods for collecting information, analyzing projects and finding appropriate and useful data. Although the typical lecture and case study method provides students with some exposure to qualitative and quantitative information, it does not require them to conduct the work themselves. A prepared classroom example, therefore, does not adequately train students to completely and independently select tools, analyze projects and strategies. Nor does it help them to learn the relationship between theory and practice.

The Limitations of Theory and Research

One of the most difficult aspects of conducting applied CED research is understanding which parts of a question can best be answered by CED theories, and which parts can best be addressed by using approaches from other disciplines. In particular, students need to learn the difference between identifying variables related to the concepts of community (sense of belonging and cooperation), economics (efficiency and equity), and development (growth and quality of life). These variables have broader implications on social issues, politics, economics and the environments in which CED applications become important. In some classroom settings, it may be more effective to combine lectures and seminars, but it may also be difficult to provide examples to support the theories, since classroom examples are often abstracted from their context. This prevents one from reaching a sound CED based policy prescription

Project Exercises — And Appreciative Learning

During the first lecture/seminar of my SFU CED course, there was a discussion about the community research projects that my students had to undertake. Each student was asked to look into their own lives, at projects within their communities or groups that they have been involved with or know about, that might be perceived as fulfilling CED criteria. The students were asked to consult with friends, and to look for instances of positive programs or projects in their communities. It was my belief that an appreciative understanding of the past and present would lead to new affirmative projections which would in turn help sustain and enhance community's development. Ideally, the community project mandate was an attempt to help students examine their knowledge about the concepts, tools and links between theory and practice. In essence, it was a strategy intended to help students take from the community to the CED class, a knowledge of theory building. The project had four components: the research project itself, the preparation of the research, the discussions that took place in the classroom, and the final presentation in class or in the community, (for example, two First Nations students from Kamloops presented research projects within their communities with residents in attendance).

Despite the fact that community projects are designed and implemented based on the prevailing needs and issues confronting a specific community, students were required to explain their reasons for designing and implementing their projects. They were also told to link their discussions and analyses to the three theoretical concepts that we were examining (community, economics, and development). I prepared several questions to guide the students to clearly identify

the three theoretical points, and to then think about the relationship between these points and practices. As a lecturer, my role in the discussion was to ask thought-provoking questions that revealed links to the theories being discussed in class. However, I tried not to lead students to focus on any specific question or theory. Instead, students had opportunities to think things through, and consult with one another. From the onset, the community projects formed the basis for our inquiry and discussion, on relevant CED theoretical points. The projects were presented near the beginning of each class and were followed then by an analysis of the class readings on community economic development.

USING THE COMMUNITY PRIMARY RESEARCH PROJECTS

Project Exercises — A Motivation Learning Technique

Assigning students to conduct project exercises can motivate them to learn CED theories in two ways. First of all the students could choose topics which genuinely interested them, they experienced and expressed pleasure in learning how their topics related to CED theories and concepts, and as such they became intrinsically motivated. Second, since the project exercises accounted for a hefty chunk of the students' class grades (about 50%). and since the students were required to present their projects to their on-looking peers they found it essential to demonstrate their understanding of the CED theories and how they related to their projects. This extrinsic motivational factor also had a great value to the students.

During the first week of classes, students were immediately assigned to conduct their community research projects. This was important because I wanted many of them to present their projects to the class soon, so that they could form connections between the practical CED project applications and the theoretical analyses. While waiting for the community project presentations to begin in about three weeks time, I asked the students to form three separate groups. Each of the three groups were assigned readings based on one of the three theoretical concepts (community, economics, and development). Each group was asked to take special care to examine the readings, make relevant notes and explore all the possible analytical points and arguments related to the three concepts. During the first three seminar sessions, each group made a short presentation and then were asked questions. The class discussions based on the assigned readings generated a lot of questions relating to the three theoretical themes being examined. I often interrupted the students in order to rephrase their questions, clarify theoretical issues, and provide a direct link to other theories and practical applications.

Project Exercises — A Participative Technique

As stated earlier, the first presentation took place during the fourth week of classes. Each student was asked to make a 15–20 minute presentation and then answer questions that students and I asked. Members of the community or organizations from which the research was conducted were invited to watch the students' presentations. Some students used slides, overheads and other visual aids. Each student was asked to clearly explain the connections between the three theoretical concepts, and how they applied to their respective community projects. Below is a description of some of the community project research exercises conducted by the students.

1. The Skeetchestn Housing Project research — Although the primary research project was conducted in Skeetchestn (near Kamloops B.C.). the presentation took place at the Fountain band Indian Reserve, near Lillooet, B.C., where the student lived. The researcher explained to the Fountain Band community how the Skeetchestn Band and its council have been able to negotiate with the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), taking initiatives for building homes for its own residents. This was an interesting presentation because the student informed the residents that most home buyers can and probably should choose their own building designs. The council arranged with the building contractor to hire and train some of the residents as building trades people. The community members and students became interested and asked several thoughtful questions. Some of the key theoretical points identified were: cooperation, leadership, participation, cultural values, shelter, income, skills training and political and administrative processes.

2. The North Thompson Sawmill project — A North Thompson band CED student explained the relationship between conventional business practices and the North Thompson approach. Most of the sawmill workers lived in and were raised in this community. There were no permanent layoffs at the mill. However, employees could take 3–6 months time off from work and still be re-hired. The workers considered the sawmill to be an important resource, so they worked hard in trying to keep the mill in business. On the other hand, the band council had set up a development corporation to manage the sawmill and channel the mills profits toward the band council to fund social programs (such as library services, skills training, day care and other mentor-support activities). The key theoretical points were: cooperation, employment, income, business, training, management, social programs, and political and administrative processes.

3. The Cache Creek Silviculture Project — This research revealed interesting issues regarding the community. The researcher showed how a single proprietorship company had taken on the task of mobilizing young offenders, and providing them with employment opportunities and skills training. In addition, the elders provided the youths with traditional Aboriginal training, including using prayers and sweat lodges. This project therefore combined tree planting, socio-cultural factors and produced income for the youth in the community. The Band council has continued to support these efforts with funding and other resources. The theoretical points covered in this project were: silviculture, social concerns, cultural activities, business, employment, skills training youth and political and administrative processes.

4. The Companions Shared Agriculture Project (CSA) — This farm is located near Aldergrove, B.C. The idea behind CSA is to have a group of urban dwellers who normally do not have the opportunity to participate in the production of their food, to agree to purchase, in advance, a share in the farm's harvest. The food is then delivered to a drop-off point for the shareholders to come and pick up, or, it is delivered to their homes on a weekly basis for an entire growing season. The main garden at Companions was about one and a half acres in size. Most of the vegetables and herbs such as corn, squash, eggplant, carrots, cucumbers, beets, lettuce, swiss chard, cauliflower, broccoli, cabbage, celery, onions, beans, peas, parsley, radishes and tomatoes were grown here. It also allows more people to be involved in the food production and marketing systems and to have a stake in it. As well, a crop rotation method created ecological sustainability as well as economic viability. Due to its efficiency, this farm grows more vegetables per square meter than do many other farms of small acreage. In this way a consumption pattern that offers dietetic diversity, convenience and a good quality of life was created.

These four projects have demonstrated the need for CED students to nurture and promote public education within their communities. The integration of skills training, socio-cultural factors into building design, employment, income generation and awareness raising that took place within the three Bands were 'spin-offs' of the Band councils' mobilization for community economic development. They all reinforced the capacity of the Bands to provide income and employment opportunities that were locally conceived, culturally sensitive and locally implemented. What is being stressed here is the Band councils' ability to mobilize and organize local resources and capacities to identify their needs, and to act effectively to sustain the 'communitys' ecology and livelihood.

The underlying theories or models of community economic development may or may not remain implicit, but they are always part of the development process. Each of the three perspectives: community, economics, and development is theory-linked whether or not the student is consciously aware of this fact. This point is crucially important because much of the controversy around the CED approach has to do less with the tactics of intervention and more to do with the underlying theories on which such interventions are based. If lecturers use my suggested lecture format and teaching methods, then CED students' categories of analysis would therefore likely be much broader, dealing much more with the total context of the situation under study and

with the tactics of intervention than would otherwise be the case. The situations under study are also linked to relevant sociological, anthropological, economic, ecological and psychological theories. As demonstrated by the four community projects cited earlier, the students research analysis covered several diverse areas, including skills training, leadership, employment, income, quality of life, healthy communities, and other developmental problems. Group and interpersonal theories that deal with community health and development and the process of improving community effectiveness, are important to the CED students.

COMMUNITY PROJECT EXERCISES — AS CED LEARNING EXPERIENCES

The community project exercises gave students opportunities to explore the links between theory and practical applications. These exercises fulfilled my pedagogical goals, by inducing students to apply the theories, examine practical projects and recognize the legitimate links between the theoretical concepts of community, economics, and development. Although the four community projects examined by the students varied in style, detail and complexity, they all had similar features. First, they contained both qualitative and quantitative information which drew links to one or more theoretical concepts. Second, the community project exercises helped describe the different situations within the four communities and how each community dealt with their problems. Third, during the project presentations, students were asked to describe the community, economic, and developmental implications of their projects. They were also advised to evaluate their arguments in light of the wider political, social, and environmental objectives and constraints. Generally, the community project exercise provided students with an elegant opportunity to understand the dilemma and confusions in balancing the competing and legitimate interests of community, economics, and development.

Appreciative Inquiry and the Learning Processes

During the course of the semester, the students and I have had come to acknowledge the potentials and challenges of the appreciative inquiry method. It provided us with the opportunity to assist students, groups, organizations, and communities to mobilize collective action in life-affirming ways. I have come to learn that my pedagogy or processes of teaching and learning theories and applications needed much more emphasis than I had previously thought. I set up a constructive framework for topical discussions about theories, applications, interpersonal matters, and teamwork.

The class interaction was very instrumental and rewarding because I created a context in which students appreciated each other's viewpoints, worked in teams and were open to constructive criticism and feedback. I strongly encouraged the students to take ownership of the CED theories. For example, most of the class discussions focussed on the students' own experiential knowledge stemming from the community project exercises and readings. They were encouraged to examine positive projects, to look for trends, and to feel free to express genuine praise whenever it was deserved. The class had an atmosphere of trust that allowed exploration into the ambiguity surrounding theories and applications. Trust, respect, honesty, and teamwork emerged as a theme which took multiple forms. For example, during the first day in class I explained in detail the goal, objectives, output and the marking system, as stated in the course outline. I asked students to write on a piece of paper other topic areas they thought needed to be covered and had not been identified on the course outline. Providing the students with an opportunity to know what they were gaining from the course, and what the tasks and assignments involved, opened up a participatory and two way communication process between the lecturer and the students. This helped to maintain and elevate my students' interest in and commitment to the course requirement.

The most challenging aspect of my teaching was facilitating the study of theory and practice for a generation of students, to whom these concepts had little meaning. I found that my being enthusiastic to helping them understand the past and the present helped them to project and expand their knowledge base. I also concluded that students do not participate effectively unless their instructor treats them as individuals, and develops meaningful relationships with them, based on honesty, respect, openness, and responsiveness. In fact, lecturers can create the possibility for on-going evolution and interaction if

students are freed up to be appropriately responsible to the changing classroom activities. The evening class never ended on time. Students spent additional time in the hallways discussing and interacting on the topics.

THE BENEFICIAL EFFECTS THE CED COURSE HAD ON MY STUDENTS' FUTURE LIVES

Several months after the CED course, I gathered data regarding my students' experiences from the community project exercises and from the course in general. I conducted telephone interviews and also urged students to send me written evaluations. I received many written evaluations, but due to limited space, I have chosen four for the purposes of this paper; and these are:

1. The first student wrote me the following paragraph

> After the CED course I visited the Fountain Band in which I presented my housing research exercises. The residents were happy to see me again. The Band council explained to me about the initiatives that the Skeetchestn Band had taken, arranging to build their own homes with the help of the CMHC. The Band council was interested in my findings, and as a result asked me to undertake a research project aimed towards identifying their housing needs and solutions. The good news is that the band council has hired me to conduct research on how they can access land and funds to build their own homes. Now I am putting into practice my CED concepts of community housing, and social and economic needs and quality of life issues.

2. The second student reported that her research exercises on Companions Shared Agriculture Project are still gaining momentum.

> After several meetings with like-minded friends, we approached the Vancouver municipal council to allocate to us an open space so that we can organize and run a public market on Saturday mornings. After several months of city meetings and council meetings, the City of Vancouver agreed to give us an open space in East Vancouver. To our great surprise and joy, this open market — the first of its kind in East Vancouver, was commissioned by City councillors, officials and the news media on July 29th 1995. Several students who took the CED theory course, and the lecturer attended the opening ceremony. We hugged and kissed each other. What a great day to see a dream come true! The people who go to this market chat and interact with one another. There is a delightful sense of community and interpersonal interaction in this market, plus an economic exchange, and educational dynamic — emphasizing the importance of eating healthy food.

3. The third student emphasized that since his presentation, his Band council has retained him to be their advisor on CED issues in their community. He feels glad because he can practice his socio-economic knowledge to help the Band.

4. The fourth student enthusiastically explained to me that the CED theory course has connected her to important people in her life. She has come to like most of the students because they care for others. We had several social gatherings and some of us have participated with our friends and partners. We have become a community with shared interests. I just miss the class.

Finally, the post-course evaluation comments that I received from the four students revealed interesting comparative dynamics. The students living in population focused group environments, such as Vancouver, were concerned with communal and quality-of-life issues. As, such their goal was to establish and strengthen community bonds and interactions. The First Nations students, on the other hand, were much more concerned

about economic and socio-cultural issues, and sought their integration to ensure meaningful developments in their communities. The post-course evaluation comments provided a clear indication about what students have learned and how they have applied their Knowledge.

My Reflections and Learnings Following the CED Course

Teaching a CED theory course and incorporating the community project research exercises was quite demanding, yet rewarding. The rewards were based upon the problems faced by both the students and the professor conducting the inquiry. As such, the course generated practical knowledge emanating from the community to the classroom and vice-versa. As the course instructor I did learn a great deal and also gained new insights. I learned that:

1. The question of course duration became significant. Two semesters or 26 weeks would have been enough time to cover both the theories and the project exercises; one semester was not enough time. Two semesters would have provided students ample time to complete their project analyses and presentations. The literature readings and discussions of issues needed more time so that students could evaluate the connections between theory and practice.

2. The primary community research exercises proved to be a useful and valuable strategy in conveying the possibility of integrating research, practical applications and analytical arguments with equally important processes of creative thinking. The exercises helped many students understand the relationship between a community, economics, and development. The research exercise was a way of encouraging appreciative learning around the classroom learning process and its potential relevance to their experiential knowledge. Also, the presentation of the actual community projects were very well received within the seminar and within the communities themselves.

3. The students and I both experienced the action learning process, because we inquired into affirmative projections of the future, attempting to promote a sound and meaningful understanding of the CED theories. In the case of the Kamloops First Nations students for example, I included in my assigned class readings, a book about CED, written by one of their leaders. They were pleased to discover that the course readings included a book based on their own CED experiences.. We had the opportunity to provide a comparative analysis of others viewpoints on CED. I found that appreciative learning can also be fostered by balancing class discussions that are structured and focused, with sessions that are deliberately open to the diverse CED approach. The assigned readings for the seminars class were given a qualitative grade and this took care of the general participation grade.

4. It is important for professors and instructors to engage in action learning exercises in addition to the literature reviews, in order to help CED students understand the theories. A great deal of meta-theoretical applications in classrooms undermines the proper teaching of CED. I paid keen interest and attention to the class deliberations. I looked for instances of students' quality work, and praised and encouraging them to keep up the good works. I looked for such trends and helped students to move in the right direction, and expressed genuine praise when they tried and succeeded. When students believe that their efforts are recognized and appreciated, they gain extra motivation and energy to stay focussed. These beneficial effects of positive reinforcement have been documented by Bushe 1995. It also helps the instructor to build alliances and gather support. In this way, the appreciative process encourages and enhances learning, because each new affirmative projection of the future is a consequence of an appreciative understanding of the past and present.

CONCLUSION

Despite the increasingly heated, and interesting debate on action research and action learning, there is an urgent need for a unified definition and model to link the different paradigms together. Unfortunately, the varying definitions and opinions about the usefulness of action research and action learning tend to confuse stu-

dents. Although the CED students conducted action research exercises on community projects, these were action-based inquiries designed to help them learn from experience and practice. Instead the primary research exercises and appreciative inquiry teaching methods actually facilitated the CED action learning process. During the whole semester, the students and I also respected each other, were very sincere, truthful, open and responsive, and reached one another. In a sense, the classroom participation and interaction enhanced the CED learning process, enabling a deeper understanding of the various dynamics of the program. Our actions were very inclusive and participative as we appreciated one another.

REFERENCES

Altricter, Herbert. (1992) "The concept of quality in action research: giving practitioners a voice in educational research" in M. Schratz (Ed.) *Qualitative Voices in Educational Research*, pp. 40–55. London: Falmer Press.

Bushe, G.R., & Cooetzer, G. (1995) "Appreciative Inquiry as a Team-Development Intervention: A Controlled Experiment." *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, Vol. 31, No. 1, pp. 13–30.

Bushe, G.R., & Pitman, T. (Eds). (1991) "Appreciative Process: A Method for Transformational Change." *OD Practitioner*, 23(3): 1–4.

Cooperrider, D.L. (1990) "Positive image, positive action: The affirmative basis of organizing" in S. Srivastva & D.L. Cooperrider (Eds), *Appreciative Management and Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Israel, B.A., S.J. Schurman, & M.K. Hugentobler. (1992) "Conducting action research: Relationships between organization members and researchers." *Journal of Applied Behavioural Science*, 28: 74–101.

Mckernan, J. (1994) "Teaching Educational Action Research: a tale of three cities." *Action Research Journal* 2(1).

Schon, D. (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner*. New York: Basic Books.

Winter, R. (1989) *Learning from Experience: principles and practice in action research*. London: Falmer.