An Action Research Dissertation as a Means of Engaging a Community Leadership Alumni Association

Michael Dillon

Abstract

This dissertation overview details an action research (AR) project with a purpose of investigating how a grassroots neighborhood leadership alumni association in the southeastern United States learned to plan and take action on community problems. Qualitative research methods included semistructured interviews and observations. The findings indicated strong elements of experiential learning, formal training, past experience, and social learning. The alumni showed moderate indications of behaving as a community of practice (CoP). The four conclusions of the study were: (1) Learning takes place as a rhizomatic *(Kang, 2007)* network of learning types including but not limited to experiential learning, formal training, past experience, and social learning; (2) Through community leadership, adults learn functional skills, relationship skills, and gain personal insights; (3) Disruptive change can impact a CoP's definition of community, purview, and organizational practices; and (4) The entwined relationship between actions and power defined the AR process.

Introduction

*C*ommunity engagement can be defined as "the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity" *(Driscoll, 2008, p. 39)*. Such collaboration can take many forms. This article is an overview of community engagement as documented in an action research (AR) dissertation titled *Grassroots Community Leaders as a Community of Practice: Utilizing Learning and Enduring Disruptive Change (Dillon, 2013)*. The theoretical significance of this study pertains to adult learning theory and community of practice (CoP) framework. Its practical significance concerns the engagement between a university representative (the author) and a community group, in the form of AR.

The aforementioned dissertation involved South County Alumni Association (SCAA), a grassroots neighborhood leadership alumni association in the southeastern United States. Members

of this group are graduates of South County Neighborhood Leadership Institute (SCNLI), which offers citizens opportunities to increase their awareness of community issues and to improve their leadership skills through leadership training and hands-on experience.

Citizens can attempt to prompt community change within a variety of structures, such as informal temporary initiatives, or through formal organizations with longstanding change efforts driven by a specific mission. However, their efforts may be hindered in the absence of prior training to support their goals of prompting community change. Community leadership institutes offer training and hands-on experience in leadership topics with a goal of equipping citizens to be more effectively involved in a variety of community change initiatives. These initiatives may include addressing hunger, affordable housing, neighborhood crime, or political action.

Unexpected changes from within or outside an organization can hinder a community group's ability to have an impact. Disruptive change *(Louis & Sutton, 1991; Morgeson, 2005)* impacted SCAA and the study when SCNLI disassociated itself from the group and formed a new alumni association. This unexpected change was addressed in the AR interventions, specifically regarding how the group would train new members who had not received the structured training from SCNLI.

Research Purpose

The purpose of the dissertation was to investigate how a community leadership group learned to plan and take action on community problems. The extent to which alumni of leadership institutes manage the learning that takes place individually and collectively may impact their effectiveness in the community *(Kearney & Zuber-Skerritt, 2012)*. The study was guided by four research questions: (1) What types of learning are taking place with the alumni as they make efforts to solve problems in the community?, (2) What are the alumni learning through their leadership efforts in the community?, (3) To what extent are the alumni operating as a community of practice (CoP)?, and (4) In what ways did the relative power of the researcher and the community stakeholders influence this AR project? The study spanned a period of 17 months.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Literature reviewed for the dissertation included prevalent adult learning theories, community of practice *(Lave & Wenger, 1991)* framework, and Foucault's *(1982/2000)* views of power relations. The adult learning theories reviewed were andragogy *(Knowles, 1968)*, self-directed learning *(Knowles, 1968)*, Kolb's *(1984)* and Taylor's *(1987)* learning cycles, Illeris's *(2002)* three dimensions of learning, transformative learning *(Mezirow, 1991)*, the role of emotions *(Dirkx, 2001)*, the body and learning *(Amann, 2003)*, the spirit and learning *(Tisdell, 2003)*, informal and incidental learning *(Marsick & Watkins, 2003)*, experiential learning *(Dewey, 1938)*, and social and situated learning *(Lave & Wenger, 1991)*. These were selected because of their dominance in the literature and potential connections to the study.

CoP framework was used to address the third research question. Lave and Wenger (1991) defined a CoP as "a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice" *(p. 98)*. Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder *(2002)* would later detail the three basic parts of a CoP as "a domain of knowledge, which defines a set of issues; a community of people who care about this domain; and a shared practice that they are developing to be effective in their domain" *(p. 27)*.

In order to answer the fourth research question pertaining to the role of power in AR, Foucault's *(1982/2000)* views of power relations were reviewed. For Foucault, power is a type of relation between individuals. Power is not thought of as some external autonomous force; rather, it exists only when acting upon another person and not necessarily in an adversarial fashion. This perspective helped to reveal the role of power relations in the study *(Dillon, 2014)*.

Research Methods and Data Sources

The dissertation employed action research methodology, which Reason and Bradbury *(2008)* defined as a "participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview" *(p. 1)*. AR can prompt learning for the researcher, stakeholders, and community of scholars. This study provided an opportunity for me to learn how to conduct AR and gave SCAA an opportunity to learn how to improve its effectiveness in the community. Finally, it gave the wider community of scholars and practitioners the opportunity to learn from the research process and

outcomes. Although it is outside the scope of this dissertation over-view, it should be noted that AR may offer the field of community engagement a valuable model for participatory problem solving.

Qualitative research methods were employed over a period of 17 months in the form of 13 semistructured interviews with SCAA members and four observations of SCNLI leadership training sessions. Since we were seeking to understand the connections between the alumni's community activity and their learning, as well as the extent to which they are a CoP, this study was best suited for qualitative methods. The stakeholders, which included the SCAA president, the five person SCAA executive committee, and myself, collaborated with respect to methods, data collection, analysis, and organizational interventions.

Findings and Conclusions

In order to answer the first research question regarding the types of learning that took place with the alumni, transcripts from the 13 interviews of SCAA members were analyzed with consideration of the adult learning theory previously mentioned. Observation jour-nals of SCNLI leadership training sessions also served as a source of data. Data analysis revealed four themes: (a) experiential learning, (b) formal training, (c) past experience, and (d) social learning. In exploring the second research question regarding what the alumni were learning through their leadership efforts in the community, the interviews were analyzed, and the observation journals were reviewed. The three themes that emerged from this question were (a) functional skills, (b) relationship skills, and (c) self.

In order to answer the third research question regarding to what extent the alumni were operating as a CoP, interviews were analyzed with respect to the three key CoP features of community, domain, and practice. The interviews revealed both strengths and weaknesses with respect to community with predominant themes of (a) communication and (b) group interaction. The domain aspect included themes that represented the common interests of the group. Although a wide variety of domain themes were uncov-ered through the interviews, these themes had commonality. The predominant domain themes included (a) diversity in the com-munity, (b) economic issues, (c) financing of initiatives, (d) orga-nizing and facilitating events, and (e) politics. This wide variety in the domain revealed the assortment of issues the alumni took on, which may present challenges regarding rallying a large team of alumni for a specific cause. The themes that fall into the prac-

tice category were the alumni's ways of doing things and their way of being in the community. As Wenger *(1998)* explained, "Practice entails the negotiation of ways of being a person in that context" *(p. 149)*. Although the analysis separated ways of doing and ways of being, the two are inseparable according to CoP framework. The themes that emerged as ways of doing were fund raising, organizing and facilitating events, and resource awareness and information distribution. The themes that emerged as ways of being were approach preference and networking and relationship skills.

A Foucauldian perspective was utilized to answer the fourth research question regarding the ways in which the relative power of the researcher and the community stakeholders influenced the AR dissertation. Foucault raised the question of how relations of power are rationalized, and this fourth research question was a step toward understanding the rationalization of power relations, in particular the researcher–stakeholder power relations in AR. The data sources for this analysis were my researcher reflection journal and a concluding interview with the alumni president. The analysis entailed consideration of five key aspects of power relations *(Foucault, 1982/2000)*: the system of differentiations, types of objectives, instrumental modes, forms of institutionalization, and degrees of rationalization. The analysis revealed that the researcher–stakeholder interactions that took place in an AR project can be viewed as relations of power *(Dillon, 2014)*.

There were four conclusions of the study. First, learning takes place as a rhizomatic *(Kang, 2007)* network of learning types, including but not limited to experiential learning, formal training, past experience, and social learning. Second, through community leadership, adults learn functional skills, relationship skills, and gain personal insights. Third, disruptive change can impact a CoP's definition of community, purview, and organizational practices. Finally, the entwined relationship between actions and power defined the AR process.

Significance of the Research

The theoretical significance of this study pertains to adult learning theory and CoP framework. One type of practical significance concerns the engagement between a university representative (the author) and a community group, in the form of AR. Additionally, the role of power in AR was examined in the dissertation. Probing power relations within the study added to the knowledge base of practicing AR. Specifically, power relations between

the researcher and the stakeholders were shown to be present in the AR process and influential in the direction of the research.

The research findings of the dissertation contributed to adult learning theory. The research findings of this dissertation contributed to adult learning theory by identifying types of learning that grassroots community leaders experience, as well as organizational learning in the form of CoP framework. The research contributed to CoP literature with respect to diagnosing the extent to which the alumni association is a CoP and the interventions that may stimulate the group to become a stronger CoP. The research documented in the dissertation offered grassroots community groups an illustration of data-informed collaboration leading toward organizational interventions. In particular, the interventions promoted organizational learning through CoP framework. Engaging with skilled action researchers can strengthen organizational learning in community groups, thereby increasing their potential to implement community change.

Conclusion

The dissertation research reviewed in this overview entailed employing AR methodology to engage a neighborhood leadership association in order to prompt better utilization of learning, with an overarching goal of helping this group become more proficient at problem solving. Grassroots community leaders can solve an array of problems when all stakeholders are included and have input. Engaging with skilled action researchers may give grassroots community leaders the framework to become more adept at community change.

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About the Author

Michael Dillon is an independent action researcher, student support advisor at DeVry University, and adjunct faculty. His research interests include adult learning theory, organizational

learning, student persistence, action research methodology, qualitative research, and collaborative action. He earned his Ed.D. in adult education from the University of Georgia.