

## Educating for Transformation in Interprofessional Practice

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### Abstract

This paper uses a praxis methodology to explore the possibility of student transformation through participation in an interprofessional university-community partnership. The experiences of participants in one partnership provided a focal point for questioning assumptions about the nature of the professional role and the relationship of university and community. In an earlier study (*Caldwell et al. 2000*) on ethical dilemmas, we found that participants need a safe place to discuss ethical dilemmas and work out constructive responses. Reconsidered in an educational framework, this need is part of a context that promotes participants' development by providing a balance between challenge and support. The developmental framework of Robert Kegan (1994) is used to reflect on the nature of this balance and the challenges of interprofessional work in the community and to suggest action.

### Introduction

In September 1995, ten units of Saint Louis University partnered with three nearby communities in the Neighbor-to-Neighbor program funded by the United States Department of Education's Urban Community Service Program. Neighbor-to-Neighbor was intended to provide services to children and families while enhancing the service-learning component of professional education. The project drew students and faculty into collaboration with community partners and, simultaneously, invited transformation for all—particularly students at the preprofessional stage.

In this paper, we apply a praxis methodology to explore the possibility of student transformation. Webster's (1979) defines *praxis* as "exercise or practice of an art, science, or skill." Pedagogically, praxis involves considering a circular, interactive relationship of experience, reflection, and action. We explore the lived experience of Neighbor-to-Neighbor by first describing the experience, then engaging theory to reflect, and concluding with suggestions for action.

## Experience

Focusing on experience invited questions like: “What is this? How does this work? How do I feel about this?” To do so in this paper meant focusing on those involved in Neighbor-to-Neighbor, how the program worked, and some of the inherent tensions.

**Experience: The Setting**—Saint Louis University has been in midtown St. Louis since 1888, and thus has shared the boom, decline, and redevelopment hopes of the area.

Community partners in Neighbor-to-Neighbor included an elementary school, middle school, and public housing complex located, respectively, south, west, and north of the university. Collectively, they are part of the city’s original Enterprise Community, an area characterized by low incomes. University participants represented departments offering professional degrees in communication sciences

and disorders, counseling and family therapy, education, law, psychology, public health, public policy, small business, and social service. Structurally, representatives of each site and unit constituted a steering committee that met monthly.

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Graduate students provided services at the sites based on needs and goals determined by the community leaders, students, and faculty supervisors. One graduate student at each site, selected by site leaders, served there as coordinator to link with the university. Each participating unit kept its own academic requirements and awarded a stipend to students chosen by faculty to participate. Rather than receiving assigned projects, students worked with site leaders and students from other disciplines to determine what project to implement. This ability to collaborate in decision making with community leaders was a key program expectation. The program emphasized community capacity and mutuality in the university-community relationship. Program activities planned in this manner included a community health fair, small business development and legal assistance, counseling services, and after-school programs. Over the five years of the program, some projects, such as school-based peer conflict mediation, became part of the routine, and incoming students assumed responsibility as other students graduated.

In 1998, steering committee members were interviewed regarding ethical dilemmas in their work on Neighbor-to-Neighbor

(Caldwell et al. 2000). Findings showed that they utilized organizational, professional, and discourse strategies to resolve the dilemmas and that safe places for discussion were important in achieving resolutions. Safe places varied from a trusted supervisor or community member to a group setting such as a committee meeting or organized classroom setting. The research also showed that participants faced professional and organizational tensions in this interprofessional and community-based environment. They felt uncomfortable and constantly challenged because the presumptive authority of professional solutions and organizational practices were usually questioned. Community members claimed their own understanding of issues and how best to address them. Each discipline offered cogent interpretations of experience and processes for education. Constant juxtaposition of differences invited transformation. This article revisits data from the research (from the perspective of educational practice) and focuses on how best to incorporate such challenges into professional education.

**Experience: Community Views**—In the process of meeting the program’s service objectives while educating professionals, community leaders served as spokespersons, brokers, or liaisons between their sites and the university. This was not easy, as one community leader described her experience of meeting one discipline’s structure:

*I’d say the first year was kind of confusing ‘cause although I said what the residents needed, and I just assumed that the students—if I say, “We need this,” they would go out and do it. But the first year was like we was finding a way to proceed in doing that. . . . We were feeling our way through the first year.*

One aspect of complexity that community leaders faced was assuming the educator’s role. At the public housing complex, one leader described finding out about a learning agreement—a formal agreement between the student and faculty supervisor used by one of the disciplines involved in the project:

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*We didn't know . . . what it is exactly they [students] were supposed to do. And they was looking to us as to say, "What do we do?" And we didn't know . . . at the time that they had a learning agreement . . . what it is they have to learn while they're here. And if it fits into what we're doing, then that's fine. But, if it didn't, and they still wanted to be here, then it was what we needed them to do. So, we're set into that learning agreement. I think it worked out good, because we both got the experience out of it.*

While many students provided community service, not all were effective, which exacerbated complexity for community leaders. One community leader discussed her role in selecting students:

*It's just been different personalities. . . . The personalities play into how effective they are relating to the kids. Some of them have related better than others. . . . You can only ask so many questions in an interview. So, each time you place somebody in there, it's going to be a learning experience for everybody.*

When students had difficulties, community members were creative in sorting through options, as this public housing resident described:

*We did get two [students] that didn't fit. Even though they stayed we worked around them, we didn't force them out. . . . When she got into trouble she came and asked us for help. We was trying to tell her that it would be better to do it this way, but she wanted to do it her way, the hard way, and she did it the hard way for a whole week, and we just sat back and let her do it her way. And then she came to us the next week and asked, "Well, what am I doing wrong?" And then we told her, and . . . assisted her. You know, that's part of learning.*

**Experience: University Views**—The Center for Educational Research and Innovation (1982) observed that “communities have problems, universities have departments” (127). Lawson and Hooper-Briar (1994) chronicled the development of helping professions (such as those involved in Neighbor-to-Neighbor) beginning in the late nineteenth century, noting that by claiming unique knowledge for defining problems and diagnosing solutions, helping professions have become more insular and concerned with specialization. Academic programs encouraged dedication to basic research with an

ensuing conflict between that and clinical practice. Accreditation standards and certification-licensing standards reinforced requirements for disciplinary programs of study before professional applications and principles of practice were presented. Lawson & Hooper-Briar (1994) concluded that the helping professions have become part of the problem, honoring categorical thinking and policies over holistic and ecological approaches. Encouraging universities to include interprofessional work can be part of moving toward needed holistic approaches to problems.

Schneider (1996) supported the call for transformation in understanding service within the university's mission in response to the legitimacy crisis confronting American higher education. She advocated shifting that mission from discovering new knowledge, developing national reputations, and supporting costly science/technical programs to "serving the community/society better and becoming a more integral part of it." Community/university partnerships are an important way for the universities to do so.

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One of the guiding values of Neighbor-to-Neighbor was that of mutuality in response to concerns about power and control. Traditional roles shifted so that community members became guides (McKnight 1995) and educators, while university faculty and students became learners. These shifts did not change the university's structure, but led to recognition of the distinctive nature of interprofessional community work as recognized by the mission of the newly formed College of Public Service, which houses Neighbor-to-Neighbor.

The program provided a focal point for questioning assumptions about the nature of the professional role and university/community relationships, such as "the professional is the expert" and "the community should defer to the university." Schön (1983) showed that such questioning leads to reflective practice and to extending imagination as organization members consider new approaches. Still, the prospect for disciplinary change was linked with the reality of standards and licensing that reinforced existing boundaries. Further, participants confronted institutional norms that more readily rewarded disciplinary rather than interdisciplinary efforts.

## Reflection

**Transformation: Developmental Theory**—While change is inevitable, it comes through challenge, when solutions to problems are not working, and when the pros of change outweigh the cons. A consistent experience in Neighbor-to-Neighbor was feeling challenged, and opportunities for change—especially developmental change—were common to all participants, particularly students. One framework for thinking about challenges in interprofessional community work has been a developmental one.

Developmental theorists (e.g., Piaget, Kohlberg, Kegan, Loevinger) have proposed stage theories that describe changes in one's frame of reference for perceiving the world. These structural developmental theories describe formal ordering principles of personality and how they function to organize a coherent worldview. One's view of the world is rarely available for conscious reflection be-

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cause an ordering system acts like an unperceived horizon that defines what one sees and how pieces fit together as a whole. Only at a later stage can one perceive how one operated in an earlier stage. Stages are qualitatively different styles of viewing reality, not a summation of observations.

Since developmental stages represent entire systems of meaning-construction, these stages are remarkably stable. Without sufficient dissonance to require new structure, a person will not change. Stage change often takes a long time and is not inevitable for adults without an appropriate developmental context, a context that must involve a balance between challenge and support.

**Transformation: Kegan's Developmental Theory**—Kegan's (1994) developmental theory offers a useful framework for describing the possibilities of transformation in interprofessional community practice. Kegan identified five orders of consciousness based on increasingly complex organizing principles regarding feelings, relating to others, and relating to ourselves. The first and least complex of the principles, commonly used by young children, is the principle of *independent elements*, which involves attachment to the immediate and to sensation. The thinking of children using this atomistic principle is illogical and fantastic. Their feelings are

impulsive and fluid. Socially, they are egocentric. The second principle, the *durable category*, typically evolves when children are between the ages of seven and ten. Their ability to organize things, people, and the self as possessors of qualities or elements enables their thinking to become concrete and logical. Their feelings become enduring dispositions and needs. Socially, they grant themselves and others separate minds and distinct points of view.

The third principle, *cross-categorical knowing*, allows adolescents to subordinate durable categories to the interaction between them, so their thinking becomes abstract. Feelings

are a matter of inner states and self-reflexive emotions. Individuals develop a new capacity for empathy and sharing at an internal rather than transactive level. Social capacity develops to allow them to

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express loyalty to a community of people or to ideas larger than self. The fourth principle, *systemic/complex knowing*, allows adults to systematically produce all possible combinations of relations between abstractions or variables. Their feelings can be distinguished and organized as internal parts into a systematic whole so that one is experienced as the author of one’s inner psychological life rather than merely the “theater.” Relationships are based on the capacity to create and recreate roles rather than to adhere to role demands. Most adults have not approached the fifth organizing principle, *trans-systemic knowing*, which allows individuals to engage in a dialectical thought process, honoring paradox and reflecting on their formulations. Feelings can be used to transform their identification with the construction of “self-as-form,” or “interpenetration of selves” (314). Social relating is based on a sense of relationship between forms, of the process of relationship as creating forms of themselves and others.

The inner logic of each principle is based on subject-object relationships. *Object* refers to “those elements of knowing that we can reflect on, handle, look at, be responsible for” (Kegan 1994, 32). The element of knowing is distinct from us so we relate to it. *Subject* refers to elements of knowing with which we are identified or embedded. We cannot reflect on that which is subject. For us,



subject is ultimate or absolute while object is relative. For example, when children develop to the level of the second principle, their momentary impulses or immediate perceptions move from being the subject of their experiencing to the object. The durable category, the second principle, becomes the new subject. Transforming our epistemologies is making what was subject into object so that we can “have it” rather than “be had” by it.

***Student Learning in the Context of Interprofessional Community Work***—Many adult learners enter school hoping to obtain something practical, not undergo a transformation. However, longitudinal research reported by Kegan (1994) indicated that graduate students experienced increasingly complex reality construction. What brings about this change? Kegan posited:

*In school, a combination of support (being taken seriously . . . and treated as . . . self-governing) and challenge (being asked to make decisions, design your own program, . . . negotiate relationships, master a discipline . . . contend with competing values, theories, and advice) facilitates growth. (294)*

Kegan suggested that we understand each stage of development as a “culture of embeddedness” or “holding environment.” This process involves being held in place (support), being allowed to separate from the familiar (challenge), and being allowed to return to the comfortable home base to gain renewed understanding of where we came from, who supported us there, and what we must take with us into the next order of developing complex thought and response.

Interprofessional efforts are natural contexts that support, even demand, developmental change from participants. Newell (1994) noted that students in interdisciplinary courses consistently reported having their assumptions about themselves and their world challenged. These students often developed an appreciation for others’ perspectives, an increased tolerance of ambiguity, and an increased ethical sensitivity. Interdisciplinary courses also promoted enlarged horizons, increased humility and listening skills, and greater sensitivity to disciplinary, political, or religious bias. In addition to the challenges of an interprofessional process, service-learning community activities bring us face to face with the complexities of real-world problems. Our neighbors’ worlds are always richer and more complex than descriptions arising from current theories.

Students in their early twenties are likely to be at Kegan’s (1994) third order of consciousness in seeking an “infallible guide outside



ourselves, in which we may comfortably invest authority and to which authority we pledge loyalty, fidelity, and faith" (112). One student used this consciousness when discussing an ethical dilemma regarding child abuse: "If I do what my supervisor tells me to do, I'm not responsible. My supervisor is the one that's held responsible. Right?"

Another student operated from this third order while dealing with a problem in a relationship with a community board member: "My boyfriend and I just sit down and talk things out. We should be able to do the same thing." But the problem did not resolve easily because the student was not aware of her own part in construing the situation and

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could not find a way to step outside her own construction. The student was unaware of the cultural differences between her way of viewing the situation and the community member's view. She believed she had the correct view (as a professional) and the community member should accept her way and stop engaging in "resistance."

Individuals operating out of Kegan's (1994) third order of consciousness construct abstracted forms, such as generalizations, hypotheses, values, and ideals. Kegan described intellectual disciplines as procedures for generating and evaluating ideas and hypotheses, "public procedures for relating to third order constructions" (286). However, he argues that mastering a discipline requires the cognitive sophistication of the fourth "systemic" or "modern" level of consciousness. From a developmental framework perspective, interprofessional community work is challenging not only because of the disjunction between the stage of development of mental complexity in younger adult students and the complexity of the work, but also because most graduate students have not mastered their professions. One student at a community site was shifting toward a mode of thinking that would allow her to take what she knew about her profession and apply it in a more complex fashion:

*Color-blindness allowed me the comfort of implicitly assuming that the repertoire I had developed as a member of one group [white, upper-class] would . . . be acceptable to another group. . . . My assumptions and resistances left me unprepared for the reality of working across significant*

*differences. How could this program . . . be expected to work with families who did not appear to maintain systematic organization? Timeliness seemed to have little value, and few appeared to attend to written notices or follow schedules. Children attended most events . . . and every meeting seemed to contain an element of chaos. Families signed up for programs and then failed to attend. . . . Gradually, I became aware that the extent to which my questions could be addressed in a culturally sensitive manner would determine the direction of the program.*

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Interdisciplinary work for preprofessional students also requires them to understand a profession’s limitations, or, as Kegan (1994) phrased it, to “give up a romanticized . . . relationship to the beloved” (298). In this case, objects of affection are our professional field, graduate program, and self-conception

as professional practitioners. This disillusionment often happens naturally in training without the challenges of interprofessional work. “Disillusionment with one’s own capacity to heal another—what Baird Brightman refers to as ‘the narcissistic injury of the training experience’—is more likely to be activated early in training, during the first practicum or internship” (298). Whenever these experiences occur they unsettle the third-order need for an external authority worthy of one’s faith and promote the process by which one puts together one’s own way of being a professional.

***Becoming Aware of Our “Frames”: A Systemic Mode of Thinking***—A guiding principle for effective interprofessional community engagement is awareness of alternate ways of framing situations, of understanding the needs and priorities of other disciplines. Petrie (1976) has urged that for some mixes of disciplines to work together successfully, the participants must learn each other’s observational categories and key terms. Discovering the theory-dependent nature of observations becomes necessary for listening to alternate formulations of the same situation and understanding other disciplines’ priorities. This level of perception is a part of the “systemic mode of thinking” (Kegan 1994).

Kegan (1994) described a pervasive cultural demand for systemic thinking that “permits a reflection on relationships and a creating of distinctions within those relationships that reorders existing arrangements according to new values” (173). This fourth-level order of thinking can operate in a “swirling field of socially constructed realities, agreed-on conventions or traditions, and interpersonal loyalties and expectations. . . . But instead of being shaped by these powerful forces the system reconstructs and regulates them according to its own way of determining value” (173). This order of consciousness enables workers to invent or own their own work; be self-initiating, self-correcting, and self-evaluating; take responsibility for what happens at work externally and internally; conceive of the organization from the “outside in”, and see the relation of the parts to the whole. This is the consciousness level exhibited by a student reflecting on frustrations with a community site:

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*Other people did not—whether it’s because they’re from a different discipline, or what—but, you know, did not adhere to the same values. . . . [The site] doesn’t make a serious effort to involve parents. They want parents to come volunteer and support what they’re doing, but what they’re doing is hard to support. . . . I don’t think parents have faith that they’re doing the right thing. . . . I really lean toward self-determination and client involvement, and those kinds of things just don’t happen. . . . So, I was really bothered by what was going on . . . and I think that maybe we were misguided in where we were placing our energies, and I was part of that as well.*

Kegan (1994) estimated that one-half to two-thirds of adults appeared not to have fully reached this systemic order of consciousness. Apparently, the sensation of being “in over our heads” as adults in contemporary culture is a widespread phenomenon and it is certainly pertinent to interprofessional community work. The situation demands increasing complexity of thought and action.

There are many reasons why interprofessional work in the community is difficult, and the demands of increasingly complex thought and interconnectedness of action are among them.

### Action

Our reflection shows how those engaged in interprofessional university-community partnerships can benefit by incorporating a developmental perspective into program activities. Acknowledging the challenge of the setting and its potential to impact assumptions regarding self, profession, and the world requires educators to recognize the dissonance created and its potential to effect transformation. The word *recognize* is particularly appropriate because it denotes the change in meaning and understanding that is involved.

Recognition prompts the community and university faculty to build support into their partnerships so participants can negotiate such challenge effectively. Supportive activities can include en-

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couraging, modeling, and providing places for ongoing reflection on action. Simple exercises like comparing uses of common terms can invite exploring alternative ways people view common situations. With such support, students can gain the ability to move from the comfort of their own discipline to explore more holistic alternatives.

They can become aware of their own preferred ways of viewing situations and “try on” those of others. Such awareness provides the potential to enter professional practice with the ability to collaborate with others to define and develop strategies to address issues.

Developing learning agreements with students and community members in interprofessional university-community partnerships becomes a complex undertaking. To what extent are community members interested in taking on the role of the educator? Developing learning agreements involves not only making a special effort to include community members in the process but also involves assessing the student’s developmental readiness for, and openness to, the diversity in not only the community but also in other professions. Faculty members can anticipate the need for including learning goals such as becoming aware of the assumptions and observational categories of other professionals as well as increasing tolerance for ambiguity. While developing and implementing a

learning agreement, faculty can also include an ongoing assessment of what students experience as “support.” This can include students’ preferences for processing their personal experiences in private or in group settings as well as the relationships that they build with community members or faculty.

Faculty are largely responsible for assisting students in their education process, and faculty themselves need support to engage in interprofessional university-community partnerships. Strong administrative support is vital. The work is very time intensive, and administrators who wish to encourage interprofessional practices in university-community settings must recognize this and offer release time or other compensation for faculty involvement.

For university faculty, this reflection on the experience of university-community partnerships suggests several possibilities for further research. From a developmental perspective, when are students best able to benefit the community and augment their personal and professional growth from involvement in interprofessional community work? Is there a way to predict readiness for the complexity of interprofessional work? Another area for research involves the manner in which our standards and accreditation requirements encourage or discourage interprofessional community work, with its potential for student transformation. What are the minimum requirements that will enable interdisciplinary programs to supplement mastery of disciplines and bring professions together in holistic considerations of complex social problems? The answers to these questions will impact the prospects for future meaningful and productive partnerships between universities and their neighbors.

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