The Role of Adult Education in Building Social Capital and Strengthening Civil Society[1]

D. Merrill Ewert[2]
Director of Cornell Cooperative Extension
Associate Dean

Social planners and policy makers have viewed adult education as a vehicle for social change since time immemorial. The role that adult educators play and the processes through which this occurs have changed in response to differing philosophies and practices. Some practitioners look to adult education to promote the acquisition of knowledge or the development of skills. Some see in adult education, strategies and tactics that practitioners can apply in their community development work. Others view adult education as a source of knowledge about the process of learning so look for ways to help people in communities acquire technical content and transform their communities.

This paper will review some different ways in which development planners conceptualize the process of adult learning and its role in community change. It will present several key findings from a Cornell University study of the community development orientations of intercultural workers and then conclude by arguing that learning which brings together content and process not only helps solve local problems but can build social capital and strengthen civil society.

Addressing Human Need

A cursory review of world events shows the magnitude of human suffering around the world but also offers many examples of programs that provide humanitarian assistance to people in need. Other programs work to sustainable solutions to the underlying causes of these problems so it may be useful to differentiate between *relief*, *rehabilitation*, and *development* to set the stage for the discussion that follows. *Relief* refers to the provision of short-term emergency aid in response to crises in which people's very lives are at risk (Ewert, 1989). As part of a short-term process (typically several months), relief workers deliver urgently needed materials (food, medicines, clothing, and other supplies) designed to ensure people's survival. In situations ranging from the war in the Balkans to famine relief in Africa, relief workers seek to mitigate the effects of natural and human-made disasters. Because of the urgency of these crises, relief workers seldom give much attention to education or the development of long-term solutions to these problems.

Rehabilitation frequently follows this period of relief, usually with the goal of restoration—of returning the people or communities to an earlier state of wholeness when basic needs met. Rebuilding houses after an earthquake, resettling refugees following a war, and re-establishing agriculture after a drought are common examples of this rehabilitation process. This rebuilding process (Anderson and Woodrow, 1989) seldom lasts more than a couple of years before relief agencies turn their attention to new problems in other locations. Those agencies with development agendas may refocus their activities toward finding more long-term and

[1] Lecture presented at conference in Taiwan, March 2000.

[2] Cornell Cooperative Extension, 365 Roberts Hall, Ithaca, NY 14853-4203, U.S.A.

sustainable solutions to the underlying causes of the conditions that brought them to the area in the first place.

Development, on the other hand, is a long-term, sustainable process through which people and communities address the underlying causes of poverty and seek to improve the quality of their lives. In some cases, this development process is instituted in response to some event or disaster (war, hurricane, earthquake, etc.). In others, development workers seek to address the root causes of endemic poverty, trying to help communities find sustainable solutions to long-term problems. The appropriate roles for adult educators in this process vary considerably, depending on their philosophies of education and community development.

Building Community

A review of community development practice suggests that we can see several different ways through which adult educators have attempted to help improve local conditions. All reflect the promotion of learning but in very different ways; practitioners' goals reflect different foci and activities designed to link the process of learning with social change. These orientations suggest different definitions of the problem and assume different roles for adult educators involved in the process.

Economic Capital

The success of the Marshall Plan in rebuilding Europe following World War II led educational planners to emphasize development models designed to build the economic vitality of communities in very different social and economic contexts. Planners and development workers translated elements of the industrial model to local communities in the Third World through the diffusion of new technologies (fertilizer, hybrid seeds, and irrigation), a process called the "green revolution" (Pretty and Chambers, 1994). This sparked research on new crop varieties and agricultural practices. While phenomenally successful in increasing agricultural productivity in some areas, it also increased social stratification and gender inequality (Murdock, 1980) because unlike the poor, wealthier farmers could afford the costs of these new inputs. As a result, they often captured the markets previously dominated by low-income producers and sometimes even acquired their land.

To promote agricultural development, many developing nations, with the support of the World Bank, invested heavily in an agricultural extension approach called the *Training and Visit System* (Benor and Harrison, 1977). *Training and Visit* is a management system through which agricultural extension educators participate in a highly structured pattern of farm visits, punctuated by regular, ongoing training in agricultural technology. This approach has subsequently been adopted in more than 50 countries (Chambers, 1997). When external funding was terminated in some countries, this highly centralized system was not sustainable (Hulme, 1992).

The diffusion of knowledge and the adoption of new behaviors has been carefully studied by social scientists such as Everette Rogers. He identified early (and late) adopters, examined the efficacy (and lack of efficacy) of alternative communication channels, and the qualities of effective (and ineffective) extension workers (Rogers and Shoemaker, 1971). The transfer of technical content, assumed by this approach, took precedence over the process of learning. Farmers were often viewed as the passive recipients of technical knowledge (Roling, 1994). By

establishing extension educators as the transmitters of content, this process created dependency and perpetuated a theory of change based on technology transfer.

In spite of these limitations and the lessons learned in the process, some community development workers and agencies continue to view extension practice as the communication of information—with the blind hope that people will be motivated to adopt new agricultural practices. As individuals adopt new practices, it is believed, the result will improve people's individual circumstances, but also the conditions within their local communities. For some practitioners, the educational process involved is seen as little more than a bag of tricks designed to convince the consumers of knowledge to adopt new behaviors.

Human Capital

Critics of the technology transfer approach to community education and development focused their attention on the transfer of skills on the assumption that people can learn to transform their own lives and communities. Strongly influenced by the economists' ability to quantify costs and benefits (Schultz, 1961), educators engaged in community-based programs began talking about building individual capacity. Training, the improvement of health, the promotion of certain values, and the development of leadership skills, it was believed, would make economic capital more efficient (Flora, 1997). The acquisition of knowledge and skills was intended to transform communities as people adopted new practices and behaviors.

This human capital approach sparked an emphasis on human resource development with the expectation that improving individual performance (Nadler and Nadler, 1994) would translate into increased community productivity. An individualistic approach, it shifted attention away from the problems of communities to the needs of individual learners on the assumption that knowledgeable and skilled people could change their societies. Learning, in this context, meant the acquisition of skills—including problem solving—that were thought to translate into the broader social good.

The problem with this "learner-centered" or "needs-based" approach, Brookfield suggests, that it is both pedagogically unsound and psychologically demoralizing (1998). It equates good teaching with the ability to respond effectively to the marketplace. Its effect was to encourage adult educators to respond to popular demand for programs rather than necessarily attempting to address the underlying learning needs of individuals and communities. The limited success of the human capital approach to community development led other practitioners to examine how the creation of social capital can stimulate community transformation and change.

Social Capital

For decades, development workers have understood social processes and engaged communities in examining and solving their own problems. Biddle and Biddle's classic work (1965) reviews the principles upon which this process of community development is based. Coleman framed this process in terms of social capital that he describes as "the set of resources that inhere in family relations and in the community social organization…"(1990, p. 300). Similarly, Putnam (1993) refers to social capital as collective norms of reciprocity and mutual trust that enable people to solve individual and community problems together. Where there are effective local organizations, a high level of interpersonal trust, and strong social networks, people solve local problems. Putnam's study comparing northern and southern Italy found that

the presence of social capital resulted in a strong civil society in which communities solve their local problems and meet human needs. Where there is less social capital (fewer interpersonal relationships, less trust, and weaker social networks), Putnam found that communities were less likely to find local solutions to community problems.

The efficacy of strong social relationships and effective social networks is well-known in community development theory and practice. Daley and Angulo (1990) label the process through which people participate in defining their own problems and identifying and implementing their own solutions, as "people-centered planning). This process not only identifies more viable solutions, it builds a sense of local ownership that makes it more sustainable than where this participation is missing. Where there is high social capital, people to work together. Social capital is both the means and the ends of that process.

This link between participation and action can also be seen in Moore and Brooks who refer to community development practice that builds on local knowledge as "bottom-up action learning/action planning" (1996). It is both more effective and sustainable. In effective economic development, Flora suggests, economic transactions are nested within inclusive and equitable networks of social relations (1997). From this perspective, learning is the process through which community members come to understand their own problems and to plan and implement sustainable solutions.

The idea that social capital can solve social and economic problems has empirical validity as well as ideological appeal. Uphoff documents how farmers in Sri Lanka formed local organizations through which they solved an apparently intractable problem, providing water for irrigation downstream as well as upstream. A group of farmers built a community-based organization that offered a local solution that transcended ethnic and regional hostilities—something that had eluded government leaders for decades. The literature offers many other examples (Krishna, Uphoff, and Esman, 1997) in which community-based educators build social capital, engaging people in conversations about their problems; these discussions subsequently led to the development and implementation of workable solutions. The premise that building social capital can promote learning in ways that solve local problems is not, however, universally accepted. Some development workers, Korten (1990) argues, are "prisoners of an obsolete paradigm," holding tenaciously to development models that ignore learning while focusing instead on the transfer of knowledge and the promotion of new practices.

Theories of Practice

Korten (1990) suggests that one can identify several "generations" of community development theory and practice. The first generation involves relief and welfare, providing materials and knowledge in response to urgent local needs. The second goes beyond the transfer of technology, attempting instead to stimulate community development by promoting self-help strategies. The third generation activities in Korten's framework involves the application of social processes that address institutional constraints to effective community development.

These first three generations represent an evolutionary change in the role of community members from passive recipients of knowledge and materials, to active participants in social processes. The educator's role shifts as well—from planner and administrator, to facilitator of social process and ultimately the mobilizer of local initiative. In addition to these three orientations, Korten also describes a fourth generation model which he refers to as self-managing

networks of people and organizations (1990, p. 117). The engine of change is not a local organization but rather a network (or networks) of community groups organized around the issues facing the lives of community members. This process places the locus of control squarely within the community rather than on some outside educator with an agenda for change.

The theories to which community development workers hold profoundly influence the educational approaches employed by practitioners. The importance of understanding how practitioners view the world and their view in the process of change led to Cornell University study on world view and community development practice in intercultural settings. Several findings from that study will be shared in the next section of this paper.

World View and Community Development

The study was based on a survey of three different groups of intercultural workers; (1) practitioners engaged in overseas mission-based work with evangelical organizations[3], (2) Mennonite[4] service workers, and (3) practitioners affiliated with non-religious relief and development organizations based in the United States. The third sample was drawn from the 139-member institutions of Interaction, a consortium of U.S.-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs) involved in relief and development. Although the details of the study are documented elsewhere (Grace, 1996; Grace, Ewert, and Eberts, 1995; Ewert and Eberts, 1993), several issues help to frame the discussion that follows.

The survey – A questionnaire designed to elicit the basic values, beliefs, and assumptions of community development workers was mailed to samples from the three different populations noted earlier. Nearly 50% of the 2500 questionnaires mailed to randomly selected subscribers to an evangelical missions journal were returned. Sixty-seven percent of the 462 Mennonite development workers who received the instrument returned the instrument. The third sample (NGO practitioners) was comprised of 240 respondents, representing a 19.5% return.

Data Analysis – The study used factor analysis (based on thirty-two questions in the survey, relating to community development theory) to identify clusters of values/beliefs held by the practitioners who were surveyed in this study. These factors represented different perspectives of development held by the intercultural workers in this study. Multiple regression analysis identified the demographic and background factors that account for the different perspectives that were uncovered in the study.

Initial findings – The initial analysis (Ewert and Eberts, 1993) based on the study of intercultural workers employed by evangelical agencies (the first sample) identified two major approaches to community development. An "assistentialist" approach defined the task of community development as the improvement of local conditions. The community development task was defined in terms of the transfer of technical knowledge to individuals. As groups of individuals changed their practices, communities would be changed as well. Outside agents, from this perspective, were needed to provide local resources and offer training designed to make this happen. The second development orientation (called the facilitative approach) was

[3] Evangelicals are conservative Protestants who believe that spreading their faith—their belief in Jesus Christ—is an important part of their religious calling.
[4] The Mennonite church is a part of the protestant religious faith community, known as Anabaptists. They are pacifists, known for practicing adult baptism, and for their strong commitment to community.

more transformative, shifting the locus of control from external agents to community members themselves. The development task was defined to include the process of engaging people in reflection upon their own conditions and subsequently to work collectively to solve these local problems that had been identified.

Subsequent analysis – When the factor analysis (Grace, 1996) was performed on all three samples together, the findings changed, revealing three different development orientations instead of the original two that were included in the original analysis. The following table, drawn from Grace (1996), summarizes the three different perspectives to community development, held by the respondents. Each suggests a different educational role for the practitioner:

Approaches to Social Change

	Assistance-based Approach	**Community-based Approach**	**Structural change Approach**
The Task:	Improvement	Empowerment	Transformation
Unit of Analysis	Individual or nation	Community	Society
Locus of control	External	Internal	Both internal and external
Role of outside agent	Provide resources	Help locals identify needs & resources	Stimulate critical reflection
Knowledge/skills of worker	Technical knowledge	Build relationships; mobilize	Advocacy: mobilize institutions

Source: Grace, 1996

Discussion

Assistance-based approach – Those individuals who propose the assistance-based approach define the community development task as the acquisition of knowledge, the development of skills, or the improvement of local (or national) conditions. There is an implicit assumption that an outside agent provides and controls the needed resources. The process of education involves the effective transfer of these material or intellectual resources—knowledge, skills, human capacity—from the educator to community members. The educational process implied by this perspective, is one of teaching, training, or skill development. It implicitly assumes that the salience of the content—the importance of the need being addressed—drives the process of change. Community change is the sum total of individual changes.

This assistance-based approach draws heavily on the economic capital notion described earlier in this paper, but it also views the process of learning as the development of human capital. The effectiveness of community development efforts from this perspective, can be increased to the extent that the process addresses basic needs. Unfortunately, this approach also promotes dependence upon outside material and human resources. The Training and Visit approach to extension, noted earlier, was quite effective as long as World Bank resources were available to drive this process. The green revolution was also effective for those farmers who had sufficient resources and access to needed inputs. It worked for large landholders but not the poor. Nor was it sustainable for resource limited countries. Those limitations notwithstanding, many community development workers, as Grace (1996) found, nonetheless continue to promote

models predicated on the transfer of knowledge, skills, and materials—on the assumption that these will somehow be transformed into sustainable solutions.

Community-based approach - The second approach identified by Grace (1996), the community-based approach, is focused on the empowerment of individuals and communities. Grace found that some practitioners see the locus of control residing in the community, with outside educators working to help local people identify their own needs and resources. This process is what mobilizes individuals and communities to take action. Interpersonal relationships facilitate community conversations that lead to specific, sustainable solutions to local problems. This is very consistent with the social capital approach described earlier. The educational task involves teaching the skills of observation, reflection, analysis, and community-based planning.

Attempts to build community-based planning approaches result in more grounded programs and more sustainable processes as people become empowered to deal with the issues that they face. Frequently, however, they fail to adequately consider the contextual factors that limit the possibilities for change. They give short shrift to an analysis of the underlying, structural causes of poverty. Under some conditions, empowerment remains little more than an ideal because of the political and economic constraints that limit people's potential options.

Structural change approach – The Cornell study identified a third (and more radical) orientation to community development—the structural approach—held by some intercultural workers. Unlike the assistance orientation that focused on the needs of individuals or communities, those holding a structural perspective focus their energies on transforming society. The mechanism through which this occurs is critical reflection—helping individual think about the underlying causes of the problems and issues facing local communities. Paulo Freire's pioneering work (1970) emphasized the identification of structural contradictions within society. As people engaged in the process of analysis (by focusing on the contradictions in society), Freire found that people not only better understood the causes of local problems, but became motivated to change them. People organized to transform the very social structures that had limited their potential as community members and citizens.

In the Cornell study, Grace found (1996) that those respondents who held a structural orientation saw how external factors affected local communities and defined the community development task in ways that included political action. The educational process was conceptualized as the learning that comes about through critical reflection; this learning process led to new ways of thinking. Mezirow shows the clarifying power of participation in conversations that lead to new ways of thinking (1990). The starting point, Mezirow suggests, is to reflect on one's assumptions—thereby transforming them—and ultimately leading to new individual behaviors and collective action.

This self-reflection—using Mezirow's terms—was called conscientization (consciousness raising) by Paulo Freire (1970) who first helped adult educators clearly see the connection between reflection and social change. Critics (Taylor, 1997) have noted, however, that Mezirow's focus on individual learning came at the expense of social learning or community action. Nonetheless, Mezirow clearly documents the important role of dialogue and discussion in community change. Learning—the process of analysis—generates new ways of thinking and acting.

Technical Content and Social Process in Community Development

The preceding analysis shows that intercultural workers hold several different views about the roles of social process and technical content in community development practice.

Social Process:

Some community development activities are high in "process" (drawing heavily on facilitation, dialogue, discussion, conflict resolution, and other tools of social interaction). Those who practice "high process" development strategies are skilled in asking questions, in engaging groups in critical analysis, in helping these groups propose and evaluate solutions, and in designing action steps to address local problems and issues. Other community development activities are "low process" in that they involve little engagement by individuals and community members in program development (assessing needs, planning, implementation, evaluation) or learning.

Technical Content:

Other community development activities emphasize the development and dissemination of technical content (teaching basic skills, promoting job-related skills, extending knowledge about "best practice" in agriculture, etc.) and issues. These "high content" activities primarily involve programs based on the generation and transfer of knowledge from educators to program participants. "Low content" development activities, on the other hand, primarily involve the delivery of services with little teaching and even less learning involved. The relationship between process and content may be seen in the following table:

Process		Technical Content: *Low*	Technical Content: *Hi*
	Hi	Community-based approaches	Civil society approaches
	Low	Delivery of services	Technology transfer

The Interaction of Content and Process:

Delivery of services – Those community-based activities that are low in social process and low in technical content primarily involve the delivery of services to address an urgent need. Some organizations or groups provide childcare, for example, freeing parents to work but the process places little emphasis on human development or learning. While addressing a felt need, this involves the provision of a service rather than a human development process designed to promote the parents' learning and growth. Another program may help low income families apply for home loans, but doing so without helping people learn how to understand the process or manage their funds. A clinic may offer immunizations but spend little time in teaching preventive health care.

Technology Transfer Approaches – This approach offers technical solutions to community problems—providing high-yielding seed varieties to farmers or demonstrating new agricultural practices that could increase production. Technology transfer approaches are particularly effective where technical solutions offer visible and immediate results. The adoption of hybrid corn in the United States earlier in this century is one example of a high impact innovation that spread quickly and adopted almost universally within a short time.

Many rural development programs have promoted community-based change by introducing and promoting technologies that were particularly effective because of contextual factors. However, other farmers who lacked access to markets, credit or other needed inputs were left out. The educational process in this approach involves identifying technical information, framing it in ways that can be remembered, and then transferring it as efficiently and effectively as possible in the hope that these innovations will be adopted.

Community-based approaches – Some community development programs emphasize the promotion of process skills but give little attention to technical content; they promote learning, facilitation, the development of leadership skills, conflict management, and community-based planning. These development workers assume that as people come to understand and are able to manage "process," they will design solutions that address the problems facing individuals and communities.

Social capital – Other community development practitioners engage in participatory processes designed to help people name their problems, to identify solutions, and to implement programs designed to transform local conditions. The process reveals the clarifying power of discussion and community analysis; it goes beyond task-oriented planning processes to engage people in examining their assumptions in ways that lead to new ways of thinking (Mezirow, 1990) and acting. Critical reflection upon the content of learning as well as the context of community enables individuals and communities to address their problems at a more fundamental level. The result is not only more carefully tested technical solutions, but the identification of contextualized answers to the problems and issues facing local communities.

Social capital is both process and product of community development from this perspective. The network of social relationships that make critical reflection possible is also strengthened through this collective search for practical answers to community problems. Engaging communities in examining content and process together generates more effective solutions because they are embedded in local social relationships. This can increase social capital and strengthen civil society.

Conclusions

Community development practitioners frequently look to adult education for models, theories and tools. Learning has been part of development models built around the creation of economic capital (helping individuals acquire new knowledge and adopt new practices) and human capital (helping individuals develop skills and apply knowledge to new problems). This is certainly part of the community development task, but only part. The growing realization of the importance of building social capital provides another opportunity for adult educators interested in strengthening communities and building civil society. Adult educators can help make community development efforts more effective by highlighting several important issues:

1. *Importance of context* – Adult educators who work in community development frequently note the limitations of technocratic solutions to complex societal issues. Some community development workers clearly bring an economic capital perspective, looking for ways to invest in improving the economic well being of communities without understanding the social context. Some have tended to divorce technical content from the social context. Since problems are highly contextual, development workers must clearly take more of a learning approach that includes the social context. More sustainable solutions to those problems are much more likely to emerge if that happens.

2. *Community-based learning and action skills* – Those development workers who recognize the salience of social capital recognize the importance of individual skills (needs identification, community-based planning, facilitation, learning, etc.) but frame this educational process in a social context. These skills may increase the efficacy of social process but as a result, help communities find more sustainable solutions to local problems.

3. *Building social capital* – Adult educators bring to community development an understanding of learning and its role in community transformation. Community-based learning, the literature and adult education experience suggest, can also build social capital in ways that solve community problems and strengthen civil society. Adult educators should give more attention to studying this link and helping community development practitioners articulate the link between social capital, community development, and civil society

References

Anderson, M.B., and P. J. Woodrow. *Rising from the Ashes: Development Strategies in Times of Disaster*. Boulder and San Francisco: Westview Press, 1989.

Benor, D., and J.Q. Harrison. *Agricultural Extension: The Training and Visit System*. Washington D.C.: The World Bank, 1977).

Biddle, W. W. and L. B. Biddle. *The Community Development Process: The Rediscovery of Local Initiative.* New York: Hold, Rinehart and Winston, Inc. 1965.

Chambers, R. *Whose Reality Counts: Putting the First Last*. London: Intermediate Technology Publications, 1997.

Daley, D. M., and Angulo, U. “People-Centered Community Planning.” *Journal of the Community Development Society*, 21 (2), 1990, 88-103.

Ewert, DM., and Eberts, P.R. "Religion, World View, and Community Development Practice." *Journal of the Community Development Society*. Vol. 24, No. 2, pp. 229-248, 1993.

Ewert. D. M. “Adult Education and International Development.” In. S. B. Merriam and P.M. Cunningham (eds.), *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1989.

Flora, C.B. “Community,” in G. A. Goreham (ed*.), Encyclopedia of Rural America: The Land and People*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 1997, 112-117.

Freire, P. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* New York: Herder & Herder, 1970.

Grace, K.A. *Religious beliefs and community development strategies : perspectives of evangelicals, Anabaptists and non-evangelical practitioners*. Masters Thesis. Cornell University. Ithaca, N.Y. 1996.

Grace, K.A. Ewert, D.M., and Eberts, P.R. "MCCers and Evangelicals: Perspectives of Development." *Conrad Grabel Review,* Vol. 13, No. 3, pp. 365-384), 1995.

Hulme, D. “Enhancing Organizational Effectiveness in Developing Countries: The Training and Visit System Revisited.” *Public Administration and Development*, 12, 1992, 433-445.

Korten, D. C. *Getting to the 21st Century*. Kumarian Press: West Hartford, CN, 1990.

Mezirow, J. *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*. San Francisco: The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series, Jossey-Bass Inc. 1991.
Moore, A. B., and R. Brooks. *Transforming Your Community: Empowering for Change*. Kreiger Publishing Company: Malabar, Florida, 1996.

Murdock, W.W. *The Poverty of Nations: The Political Economy of Hunger and Population.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980.
Nadler, L., and Nadler, Z. *Designing Training Programs: The Critical Events Model* (Second Edition), Gulf Publishing Company: Houston, 1994.

Rogers, E. M., and Shoemaker, F. F. *Communication of Innovation.* New York: Free Press, 1971.

Roling, N. “Facilitating Sustainable Agriculture: Turning Policy Models Upside Down.” In Scoones, I., and Thompson, J. (eds)., *Beyond Farmer First*, London: Intermediate Technology Publications, 1994, 245-248.

Schultz, T. “Investment in Human Capital.” *American Economic Review*, 51 March), 1961,1-17.

Taylor, C. *Multiculturalism, Examining the Politics of Recognition*. A. Gutman (ed.) Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1994.

Uphoff, N. T. *Learning from Gal Oya: Possibilities for Participatory Development and Post-Newtonian Social Science.* Ithaca, N.Y. : Cornell University Press, 1992.