

Who needs it? Three essential elements of a framework for assessing needs

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Background

In 2001, Koia! Koia! Towards a Learning Society recommended three key areas to provide a framework for ACE funding. One of those concerned "emerging needs, including local responsiveness and innovation." In 2003, the government announced five national priorities for ACE funding. One of those is "strengthening communities by meeting identified community learning needs." In 2005, the ACE Funding Framework provided for a base rate that will fund providers to assess the learning needs of their communities and to design a programme of activities that will meet those needs. The 2006-2010 ACE Professional Development Strategy and Action placed a similar emphasis on the assessment of community needs.

As a result of these multiple forces, many ACE communities are now attempting to identify community needs and ACE Aotearoa is attempting to assist in this (eg: Benseman, 2006: Hindemarsh, 2006).

This brief paper is the result of discussions in the tau iwi meeting at the 2006 ACE Aotearoa conference. There was a concern expressed that unless ACE educators frame their needs assessment and analyses of data comprehensively, then their findings and interpretations will be restricted and they will develop inadequate solutions. A small group volunteered to create this brief paper to be disseminated widely on the topic.

The purpose of this paper is to briefly present three essential elements of a framework to collect, and interpret needs and subsequently create strategies to meet them. The paper begins with brief definitions of communities, needs and methods of needs assessment before exploring the three essential elements of community needs. It concludes with a challenge to adult educators to use a comprehensive framework in their needs collection and interpretation and in the creation of strategies to meet those needs.

Definitions

Communities, as discussed below, are presumed to be made up of individuals who share identities based on such things as geography, education, ideology, ethnicity, class, gender, ability, religion, recreation, and, particularly relevant to this paper, needs. Generally, a community is assumed to be a collective which shares understandings, values, beliefs and norms. We often assume that communities are 'good things' and share positive, healthy goals, but in fact, some communities can be noxious and harmful.

Needs are complex phenomena but are best described as the difference or gap between what currently exists and the desired or necessary future goal. They are not to be confused with wants and desires, which do not suggest a similar lack, deprivation or scarcity. As will

become evident in the discussion below, some people may have limited life experiences and thus express their needs within a limited range of possibilities.

Space limitations prohibit an exploration of the **methods of needs assessment**, but suffice it to say that they are extensive and include: sampling, performance appraisals, consultations, interviews, direct observations, focus groups, questionnaires, surveys (telephone/postal/email), tests, reviews (relevant literature, services, reports, policy/legislation, demographic/economic/social/cultural data).

Regardless of which instrument we choose, however, needs assessments may too often reveal only the needs we are looking for rather than the needs which exist. Thus, it is important to employ a full range of categories to guide the collection, analysis of data collected through the needs assessment process and any response to the identified needs.

Three essential elements

Individual needs

When we look for these needs, we focus on the individual and their lack of... something. Thus, when we discuss barriers to adults' learning, for example, we place the responsibility on the shoulders of the individuals. A needs assessment framed with this focus typically will identify adults' lack of appropriate attitudes, strong motivation, adequate money/energy/time, family support, transportation. These findings are supported by the literature, imported primarily from the USA and UK, which focuses on the individual. Meeting these individually based needs becomes a matter of providing programmes such as: motivational, budgeting, career planning and time management courses.

Organisational needs

When we look for these needs, we look at the organization and its responsibility for creating the gap between the current situation for adult learners and the ideal. Thus, when we discuss barriers to adults' learning we identify that the problem might lie in things such as lack of on-site childcare facilities, dark parking lots for after hour classes, classes at inconvenient hours or with too high prices, an organisation's reluctance to take its courses onto a marae, or to organise and value study circles, marae/kitchen/garage learning or peer teaching activities. It may also be that an organization needs a five-year strategic plan, board of advisors, a separation between governance and management and equipment like photocopiers and cameras. Meeting these needs often becomes a matter of the organization taking the responsibility to re-organise the procedures and policies which guide it.

Societal needs

These are the most awkward needs to identify. This is evident in an informal exercise that Dr. Joyce Stalker has undertaken for the last 15 years among University of Waikato young and mature university students. When asked to identify the barriers to adults' learning no more than 5% of any group identified societal needs. 85-90% of them identified individual needs and 5-10% identified organisational needs. In other words, we have to work hard to think about this area of need. Our tendency seems to be to deal with the people we have in front of us or with organisations. However, these are the easier options and we ignore societal level needs at our peril, for they inevitably interact with and shape needs at the other levels.

Societal needs are ones that concern the political, economic, cultural and social aspects of our worlds. They include the roles of the government (legislations, laws, military, police), the media, religious and educational systems. They encompass prejudices (eg: racism, sexism, homophobia). If we consider societal needs when we discuss barriers to adults' learning, we

look at the structures which perpetuate the gaps between the existing and ideal situations for adult learners. We might note that there is no Ministry of Adult Education, not any legislation which protects the rights of adults as learners. We might notice that the media tends to value adult learning which is done within institutions, rather than at the kitchen table, in the garage or on the marae. We would see that racism and homophobia discourage some adults from entering some institutions. We would identify economic issues like migration, unemployment and poverty and note how they contribute to some adults' lower participation.

Meeting these kinds of needs requires that adult learners participate in democracy, and are truly empowered, that is, they can envisage and act to create a better world. It simultaneously requires adult educators to be adult learners and acknowledge and address these issues. The responses to these needs are not "an extension of schooling" (Tobias, 2005). Rather, they require us, together, to create activities which foster active citizenship.

Our learners, and we as learners, need to develop our abilities to understand who holds the power, how that happens and how to act effectively to create new and better structures. Activities would be about adult learners' rights—rights as humans, workers and citizens--how to organise for change, to lobby, to influence government, the media. They would focus on community economic development and foster political, cultural and historical knowledge in order to foster a more just society for all.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a needs assessment is a complex undertaking. It can be reduced to the more simple tasks of looking for individual and organisational needs. However, this would ignore a third essential area -- societal needs. This area must be considered when adult educators collect the data, analyse it and devise and implement strategies to meet the needs. Needs which have been assessed via fewer than all three of these elements will be only partial and strategies devised to meet them will be incomplete. Adult learners deserve better from us.

References

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