Community-Led Librarianship Demands an Asset-Based Community Development Approach

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ABSTRACT

For the public librarian, archivist, or curator, asset-based community development (ABCD) is many things: a professional practice, a research method, a partnership-building vehicle, and an important tool with which to support the development of healthy, vibrant and sustainable communities. ABCD is the opposite of, but complement to, needs assessment studies. In the latter, emphasis is placed on what's lacking in a community, its deficits, what it needs; rather than what it already has, its assets. ABCD is premised upon the belief that all communities contain a wealth of resources: in the people who live there, in their associations, clubs and institutions, as well as the businesses they run and frequent. This paper introduces the value of a recently offered graduate course in ABCD for students with interests in the new community-led librarianship. It is also a course, that I hope, contributes to contemporary conversations about a re-envisioned LIS curriculum, and responds to the pressures I have experienced firsthand in both the community and in the classroom. The phrase "our interconnected world" is interpreted here as that world beyond the four walls of the library and into which public librarians find themselves embedded in unfamiliar territory. These are communities at a far remove from the status quo. At the heart of this work is a commitment to social justice through community development that places communities, their members, and their assets at the centre, and the library professional on the sidelines in a capacity-building role and as a useful source of bridging social capital.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

LIS education, curriculum, research methods, pedagogy, community engagement, community-led services, public libraries, social justice, specific populations

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

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INTRODUCTION

This paper introduces the value of a graduate course in asset-based community development (ABCD) targeted to GLAM students with interests in public facing service work. The course responds to a number of contemporary pedagogical issues, including: what to do about research methods (Luo 2017; Mandel 2017), how to deliver course content within a critical

pedagogy that supports experiential learning (Brzozowski & Roy 2012; Bloomquist 2015; Hartel et al. 2017); and, how to contextualize the development and translation of professional competencies beyond traditional institutional settings and positions (Turner & Gorichanaz 2016). It also makes explicit the connection between at-risk jurisdictional knowledge and today's professional work (Ibid.).

The course "Community-Asset Building" delivered to iSchool students at the University of Toronto since 2019 has a deep taproot in the field's rich tradition of social justice work through community-based and praxis-inspired research, pedagogies, and professional practices. Its most recent antecedents can be found in the establishment—during the revolutionary times of the 1960s and 1970s—of ALA's SRRT in 1969, and the short-lived, but no less radical, Institute of the Floating Librarian (Penland 1970). Over the intervening decades, this progressive sector of the field has flourished with each generation of educators, researchers, practitioners and students contributing to the struggle for social justice. Some examples include: the principles underpinning the community informatics movement (Clement et al., 2012; Gurstein 2007; Mehra 2005), the introduction of service learning into LIS (Yontz & McCook 2003; Mehra 2005), Mehra & Srinivasan's Library-Community Framework for Community Action (2007); the growth of critical literacy studies (Hall 2010); and the establishment of the Progressive Librarian's Guild in 1990 and Library Juice Press in 2006. Canada's experimental model for community-led libraries also belongs here (Working Together Project 2008).

Taken together, all share commitments to critical policy interventions that work to surface the role of power in the unequitable distribution of society's finite resources, including information; and, the emancipatory potential of critical literacy as inspired by activist educators like Paulo Friere and John Dewey (Hall, 162). Finally, Kreps et al.'s definition of information literacy provides a centering rationale for LIS students in a course on ABCD: "information literacy and the knowledge of information management can help engage people on society's margin to become aware of, and resist, the corporate-politics-media nexus, empower themselves via active involvement in the democratic process, and take action to improve their marginalizing social and economic conditions" (as cited in Mehra & Srinivasan 2007, 124).

The remainder of this paper is organized into the following sections: (1) introduction to ABCD, (2) forces that inspired the course; (3) outline of the course's pedagogical goals and learning outcomes; (4) reflection on the value of traditional but at-risk jurisdictional knowledge for ABCD; and (5) concluding remarks.

(1) WHAT IS ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT?

As described by Phillips & Pittman, "community development has been around for as long as there have been communities" (2009, 3), however, community development as a bona-fide field of scholarly research and professional practice emerged only after WWII, in response to the reconstruction needs of Europe, and the multiple and complex societal challenges facing newly decolonized nations in the Global South (Ibid). In both instances, international support and resources (human, technological, etc.) were needed to create conditions conducive to economic development and stabilization. Some of the key features of this approach include: a singular focus on needs identification and the development of programs to meet and/or alleviate those needs; a recognition of the association between community development and economic development; and, the goal of working with the actual communities themselves for the purpose

of knowledge mobilization leading ultimately to community independence and autonomy (Haines 2009, 39).

The ABCD model, developed by researchers at Northwestern University's Institute for Policy Development, Professors John Kretzman and John McKnight (1993) departs from the above model in its focus on community assets as opposed to community needs—its strengths rather than its weaknesses (Ibid., 4-5; Haines 2009, 38-39; Mathie & Cunningham 2003). In this way, community members are transformed from passive and individual recipients of government programs, to a collective of empowered citizens, problem solvers, and advocates for their community. Where needs-based models lay down a mental-map of poor neighbourhoods as lacking, troubled, and problematic, an asset-based approach surfaces the capacities already inherent in the people, associations, and institutions of the community. In the words of Kretzman & McKnight,

> Once this guide to capacities has replaced the old one containing only needs and deficiencies, the regenerating community can begin to assemble its strengths into new combinations, new structures of opportunity, new sources of income and control, and new possibilities for production (1996, 25).

From a public policy perspective, public service professionals can play an essential part in this work if they are willing to suspend their role as "expert" in order to engage in research and community development that is truly community-led, participatory, and action oriented. Being able to listen, to critically assess one's own subjectivity, and relinquish control, are some of the attributes necessary for this work.

Finally, since the publication of Kretzman & McKnight's (1993) *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets*, ABCD as a community development practice has been adopted around the world and has been expanded to account for newer theorizations around concepts like social capital, strong- and weak-ties, and community-led approaches to traditional public services in like health care (Harrison et al., 2019), heritage conservation (Gitty 2017), social work (Sinding et al. 2015), and in the community-led library model gaining traction in Canada and the United Kingdom (Pateman & Willment 2013).

(2) INSPIRATION FOR THE COURSE

This course was the result of a confluence of factors which have challenged me, as a researcher, educator and former librarian, to re-envision my curricula. Foremost among these are today's students, the majority of whom demonstrate a fierce commitment to, and activist orientation towards, issues of social justice, inclusion and equity, and they want the public library, archive or museum to be the place from which they can contribute to positive social change. These students are also vocal about wanting more experiential learning opportunities resulting in concrete deliverables suitable for a professional portfolio.

The course is also a response to results of my own Canada-wide study into library labor (Stevenson 2020) that revealed, on the one hand, a universal enthusiasm for community-led librarianship, as captured in the response of one CEO to a question about the future of professional work, "70% of our librarians' time will be spent out in the community" (Ibid., 48); and, on the other hand, uncertainty about what these librarians will actually be doing beyond

traditional library outreach which, according to the community-led model, is not the same thing (Working Together 2008, 14-16). Indeed, for one new librarian engaged in this work, the way forward was anything but clear, *"Like, what is the point of this? Why am I doing this? Why am I here? Why is the library paying me a high salary to have a cup of coffee and play cribbage with this person, right? What is the point of this work*" (personal communication, 2015*).*

Finally, I sensed that our students lacked the analytic tools and theoretical frames necessary to critically interpret contemporary policy debates around problems like the wealth gap or social exclusion/inequality for the purpose of mounting effective public library interventions.

(3) COURSE OUTLINE, PEDAGOGICAL GOALS, AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

The course is designed as a 6-week workshop where teams of 4 select a neighborhood that has been identified as a Neighborhood Improvement Area (NIA). In 2014, the city's Center for Research on Inner City Health assessed Toronto's 140 neighborhoods across 5 domains of wellbeing: physical surroundings, economic opportunities, healthy lives, social development, and participation in civic-decision making. They also measured factors like unemployment, high school graduation, walkability, access to community space, access to healthy food, and air quality (TSNS 2020 n.d., 10). City benchmarks were then established and neighbourhoods that fell beneath the benchmarks were designated as NIAs and prioritized for funding and support. The work of the student teams is to conduct a community asset mapping exercise within their NIA and reflect on the efficacy of the approach for community development and its potential value for their future work as public librarian/archivist/ museologist.

The course's learning goals are achieved through desk research, weekly readings, written reflections, and hands-on research experiences. By the end of the course, students have: (a) increased their knowledge of the challenges and rewards associated with naturalistic inquiry; (b) developed a critical policy orientation towards questions about institutionalized inequality at the municipal level; and (c) created a community asset map for inclusion in their professional portfolio. Details of each are described below.

a) Students engage with two qualitative research methods. First, the field of urban geography's practice of observational walking as a means of data gathering is introduced. Urban geographers Pierce and Lawhon define this method "as a self-conscious, reflective project of wandering around to better understand an area's physical context, social context, and the spatial practices of its residents" (2015, 656). Each team member visits the neighborhood at a different time of day and day of the week. Following these walks, students produce a team report and presentation of what and who they saw (or didn't see), paying attention to the experiences of their five senses. Student presentations have included videos, maps and photographs as well as audio soundscapes. As part of their "walk-abouts", students often gravitate towards the small family restaurants specializing in their home country cuisine, a hallmark of the city's NIAs.

Second, teams engage in participant observation at a community event of their choosing. They are encouraged to "move beyond their comfort zones", but can choose to participate in a local library's programming. Before the event, students familiarize themselves with the method and develop plans for how they will gain access the event, present themselves, and capture what they observe and experience. Students write up their field notes in a report and debrief the experience in class.

Beyond library programs (knitting, baby-time, and a spelling bee), students have demonstrated great initiative in their choice of community event, e.g.,

- a tenants' association summit organized by a tenants' union to find ways to mobilize against renovictions, volatile landlords, skyrocketing rents and, for some, ways to organize a tenants' association in buildings without one;
- a Syrian children's choir practice and final performance;
- a community screening of a movie about the history of the neighbourhood followed by a panel featuring representatives from municipal government, a development corporation and community leaders on questions from the audience about gentrification, gun violence and unemployment;
- community meal programs (as volunteers and diners);
- A bingo night at a local hall.

Both the walk-about and participant observation assignments present students with a range of problems to solve ensuring a rich learning experience. For example, students often express anxiety before entering a community about conspicuousness, and about the impact their own positionality will have on their ability to observe. The following student reflection is representative,

"This is what I worry will be my biggest challenge in engaging in participant observation and my walk-about: I am *exactly* the person that NIA 85 is gentrifying for (an able-bodied, university-educated queer white millennial in the arts), and I look like it. I am concerned that while I may do my best to be invisible, or integrated into the community, my own biases will impact what I notice about NIA 85, or how NIA 85 presents itself to me" (Jamie, not their real name)

Inevitably, student concerns open directly into conversations about research ethics as per the following student's revelation while engaged in one of the readings,

"While I sat on the bus, reading Moretti's chapter on *Walking*, I chuckled quietly to myself as I read her first line "Read this chapter on the bus." (p.92). I instinctively looked around to see if anyone was looking at me. Conscious of who was looking or listening to me, I wondered how I would feel if someone was observing my behavior and writing about it, like I am about to do for my upcoming fieldwork. It made me question issues of ethics, consent and privacy, even in public spaces" (Faraneh, not their real name).

Finally, teams are responsible for producing a detailed plan for conducting a community survey or focus group which they submit [but do not undertake due to current time constraints] with their asset map.

b) Before entering the community, students research their NIA. The city's website provides neighborhood profiles featuring maps and social demographic information such as ethnicity, age, race, housing, poverty, income, language and country of origin. Each data point is compared with the city's average highlighting relative impoverishment. For NIAs, the picture

that emerges is of an inner-city neighborhood, or one at the industrial margins of the city whose residents are members of a racialized community. People live alone or in large family groups in high-rise apartments. The majority live at or below the poverty line. In addition to the municipal website, students consult the city archive (for a history of the neighborhood), social media (for community groups), policing reports, and the mainstream media for any coverage the neighbourhood has received.

c) In addition to LIS scholarship, the field of urban geography provides students with the analytic tools to critically interrogate life at the margins and the forces that keep people down but that might also be subverted towards a more emancipatory project. Of particular note: David Harvey's theory of accumulation by dispossession to describe the impact of gentrification on the city's poor (2008); Ash Amin's unpacking of the issue of social exclusion as a source of legitimation for the neoliberal project (2006); and, Paul Kitchen's work on the smart city as a means of social transformation (2015).

d) The penultimate assignment is the asset map and plan for community input through a survey or focus group. The asset map has taken many forms. Students have produced hand-crafted interactive maps with moveable Velcro assets, three-dimensional models built of Lego, and digitally interactive maps with photographs, video clips and live links to existing services and assets. Assets identified by students tend to be community amenities, groups, public services and small businesses, public art and green spaces, as well as community leaders.

(4) JURISDICTIONAL KNOWLEDGE AND PROFESSIONAL COMMITMENTS REFRAMED

As an educator and researcher in the area of public librarianship, I have found myself despairing at the attitudes of the public library leaders I encountered on my cross-Canada study into the changing nature of work in large urban libraries. Many dismissed our Masters library programs for focusing on traditional and outdated competencies like reference, collections development, and cataloguing (Stevenson 2020, 46-47). Certainly, their enthusiasm for community-embedded librarians was a positive development, but negation of jurisdictional knowledge without any attempts to reframe it was concerning. The missing link, I have decided, is to be found in the field's historically continuous commitment to literacy and specifically critical literacy (across modalities). A course in ABCD exposes students to a participatory action research methodology and a philosophy with which to enter communities and make valuable contributions as information intermediaries, translators, conduits and organizers of the community's knowledge in service to a social project animated by the assets of that community. Students will need empathetic and sophisticated reference skills, the ability to collect community-generated content, and expertise in knowledge management if they are to be a help and not an impediment to the change their communities want to be.

(5) CONCLUDING REMARKS

There is nothing wholly new about exposing MLIS students to community development in general and ABCD in particular. Yet, given its methodological requirements and its spatial and temporal specificity, it takes on a different meaning with each successive wave of students.

Students bring their own generation's understandings and personal experiences to the work of interpreting and responding to contemporary manifestations of social injustice. This course provides future librarians with access to their chosen field's proud history of humanitarian work, reframes the value place of jurisdictional knowledge , and provides them with a taste of the kinds of real-world challenges associated with puzzling through a community development project that privileges the identification of a community's assets despite its designation --from above-- as impoverished and in need of improvement.

Given the content and learning goals of this course, 6 weeks is not enough time. It is the hope of this instructor to turn it into a year-long service learning course.

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