

## Collaboration and Change: A Plan for Practice

In my nearly 4 years of work at United South End Settlements, a modern-day settlement house, I have been fortunate enough to experience a variety of different aspects of such an environment: nonprofit work, adult education management and planning, classroom teaching, social and human services, balancing modern technology with traditional organizational tools, self-directed professional development, finding or inventing resources rather than purchasing them, and perhaps most importantly, experiencing the wide diversity of the staff and participants of the agency representing people across all demographics, particularly from the South End and Lower Roxbury neighborhoods of Boston. A core goal of the agency is serve as a community gathering place where people from such diverse backgrounds but who live in close proximity may learn, get to know each other, and find ways to build the relationships needed that support the underlying security, mutual respect, and community planning that allow their families to flourish and be happy. More specifically, this end is sought through a number of well-defined programs that develop and offer various kinds of educational opportunities. There are approximately 10 different programs and a total agency staff of about 50 people, which includes non-program administration staff.

Several conditions influence the need for improved collaboration and organizational development. First, the educational programs serve specific groups within the community, and there is very little overlap between these groups. For example, there is a Senior Services program which offers general-interest classes (exercise, presentations on issues of aging, etc.) to area seniors as well as an Early Childhood Education program which offers a preschool with qualified teachers. Because the participants (called "clients" by some nonprofits) are independent of each other, and the program requirements and operation are separated, very little communication or partnership exists between either the participants or the staff. Given any two programs, there exists the same weak or even nonexistent relationship. Also, because of the number of programs and total staff, most programs have very few, and sometimes only one, dedicated staff member. The programs are "islands" with limited communication, and authority is distributed loosely across them. There is no staff member dedicated to Human Resources, and no attention to this exists, other than most basic benefits plan administration. Typically, the guidelines of each program is determined in part by an external influence, most likely a funder, who requires that well-defined content be taught and that measurable outcomes are reported in order to justify receiving a grant. At the same time, there is almost always a great deal of flexibility in the pedagogical design and implementation of the classes, workshops, and other offerings. Program staff makes these decisions in a fairly isolated way. Participants rarely have opportunities to provide feedback. A single monthly meeting between the managers of each program is designed mainly as a way to convey administrative announcements, but very little information- or resource-sharing is done. Half-jokingly, an analogy has been made between our agency and the U.S. Democratic Party: each is composed of a number of smaller special-interest groups that do not always understand how their missions and visions overlap.

In this plan for practice, I will be addressing one very specific area in which I believe that the tools and methods of diversity, teambuilding, and group processes would make key improvements. Certainly, attention to these areas would be helpful at all levels of the organization, ranging from staff interaction to professional development, but my agency has always viewed itself to be most dedicated to the service of our participants. At the same time, there are almost no formal structures in place to involve the participants *directly* in the determination of how to shape the programs and how to improve the specific services and classes that we offer. At the program level, limited informal interviewing is used to get feedback from participants about “what to improve”. This is done very inconsistently. At the organizational level, this kind of participant involvement does not happen at all. Because my particular role involves teaching and facilitating adult learners who are seeking employability, technology, and GED-preparedness skills, I will focus on a plan that addresses the program level and establishes a way for the participants to participate in the program planning directly and have a way to influence the classes and workshops that address these content areas. (Unfortunately, our classes are in the middle of our year’s only extended break - 3 weeks in August - so I will be unable to properly test my plan at the time of writing of this Plan for Practice, as even most staff members are on vacation.) On a personal level, I believe that this will not only help me to understand our participants more deeply, but also this will encourage me to find ways of working more closely with other programs within the agency – particularly those with which I otherwise find little overlap or chance for collaboration. Because of our organizational structure, we tend to see ourselves in terms of “silos” of service and project ourselves that way to participants, while I believe that we would actually collaborate more internally if we opened our planning processes to the participants, who really don’t care about our program structure – they only know that they need good jobs, educations, information, social connections, and safe families and neighborhoods. The tools of organizational change will be integrated into an expanded group of educational planning meetings in which both participants and staff are invited and encouraged to attend.

### **Cultural Sharing Meeting** (held during class orientation or during one of the first classes of a series)

Some longer-term classes allow for a formal orientation for new/returning participants, while the short-term classes may not. In either case, one activity that I am planning is to utilize an open discussion for the entire group in which each individual reveals personal cultural history. Because both program staff and participants are all adults, all will participate as equals and identify cultural history in the way that is most meaningful to that person. Although we will not speak directly about class planning in this discussion, I feel that it will be an important part of allowing the teaching staff and participants to reveal themselves to each other as a way of starting to build the trust needed to share their opinions and express their needs. Although our answers in the CCT Diversity workshop were allowed to be a little more generic, I plan to add the following questions to be considered in our answers: “In your culture,

how do people learn best? What are teachers like? What makes a teacher a great teacher?" By connecting the Cultural Sharing with educational points of view, this will help all participants and teachers to be aware of each other and know that they are allowed to communicate their styles of learning, which traditionally has been a point of hesitation. Many participants enter our classes assuming that a very traditional didactic teaching style is used, since that is all they know from their previous schooling in which individual learning differences were not recognized. Last year, participants and staff represented 18 different countries of origin, and such differences were never made explicitly clear and were rarely discussed. One side note to this activity is that our staff teachers attempt to be extremely sensitive to personal information and avoid any imposition upon privacy of participants, so it would be critically important to establish the same ground rule that was used in our CCT workshop – that all revelations be strictly confidential inside of our room and would not be discussed with people external to the activity. Also, it might be necessary to enumerate examples of specific cultural backgrounds on a highly visible whiteboard so that all comprehend the activity.

### **Dialogue** (monthly meeting)

As a further step, I would like to plan to run a monthly Dialogue in which we invite all participants and staff to discuss directly how to improve our classes in practical ways. The Dialogue would serve this well because the direct question of improvement has personal meaning to each person, and most staff and participants have always seemed to want more opportunity to voice their opinions on such topics. The Dialogue structure would add a key dimension to this though. In the classroom, I have observed that the more quiet/introverted participants may hesitate to speak because interruption is extremely common, difficult to contain, and often serves to only reject the previous comment. This has led to much frustration. By using the "talking stick" idea as an artifact that represents ownership of the speaking time, everyone will be able to speak without the fear that they will not be able to get out their thoughts "in time" before someone else speaks. Because the topic addresses what needs to be improved, this would be a good way to get everyone to become familiar with the Dialogue process because staff and participants spend some time already talking about this, but participants are much more likely to address each other than staff, and the same is true about staff, who seem to discuss problems without including participants in the discussion – perhaps because this displays a certain vulnerability of the teacher? A further possibility to this Dialogue is that it might be useful to show the film "Blue Eyed" to both participants and staff as a discussion point for a Dialogue activity. I believe this might help form understanding about the meaning of "authority" in our classes and catalyze a discussion with two purposes. First, from the participant point of view, this Dialogue should help the participants to clarify in their own minds how they perceive authority, what feelings they have, and what they want to be changed. From the teacher point of view, the film may help to underscore the need for them to actively seek student feedback during the classroom planning process, beyond simply being "open" to suggestions. As a teacher, I participate in small-group curriculum planning meetings, and I believe that including participants in the process may help create understanding and inclusion in the learning that

takes place with all involved. The film "Blue Eyed" is one example of a starting point for such a discussion, a Dialogue structure would help participation to be distributed between all, and hopefully, this will provide two ways to include participants in the planning process, both in the more open-ended Dialogue and in the more structured staff planning meetings.

### **Future Search timeline** (ongoing) and **Appreciative Inquiry meeting** (twice yearly)

Another tool that I would like to use as a foundation for class planning activities would be to implement a timeline that might be eventually used for a Future Search process. Although a full Future Search meeting might be a longer-term prospect, I believe that creating a timeline at first would be an important way to facilitate participant-driven class plans. The core problem to be solved will be, "what is needed to create meaningful and effective adult education opportunities?" Both participants and staff would add events to the timeline along the personal, community, and global levels. This would help to inform the process of planning because there are many participants and staff who have been part of the agency's programs for 20 years or more, and many newer people have very little opportunity to learn firsthand about the very dramatic changes to the South End neighborhood over the past several years. I would like to implement this timeline in a relatively public area of the agency and perhaps allow it to be available for additions for a few weeks so that many people have a chance to contribute. In fact, this timeline could serve as a living document on which to consider the same question over years of time. Then, using the timeline as a guide, I will organize two major planning meetings (beginning of fall and spring class terms) that include both staff and participants in which the following will occur:

1. Review and discussion of the timeline
2. Describing how events in the timeline connect to the educational experiences that have been most important for participants and staff.
3. Implementation of an Appreciative Inquiry activity. In this activity, participants and teaching staff will be paired together, and keeping the timeline in mind, each will ask the other to describe educational experiences that worked the best for them. These could be particularly joyful classroom experiences, times when something positive was learned, or times when they were able to teach something important to someone else. Both participants and teachers will be asked to identify both in roles as teachers and learners. We will continue the stages of inquiry by allowing each group to determine how those positive moments could be repeated in practical ways in the context of our current GED, employability, and technology classes. The entire group can then reconvene and reveal some of the outcomes of the pairs to the entire group. These outcomes would be recorded, and this could serve as the foundation of a learning content library that is then shared in all of the classes. At this point, the teaching staff could refer to the appreciate inquiry outcomes to remind themselves of what has worked well for students, develop content-appropriate activities that recreate that experience as much as possible, and store them into the library as well as use them

directly in the classroom to re-orient everyone to finding the positive and looking to the future. In a program that experiences very frequent change, it can sometimes be too easy to lose sight of the bright points of the past classes inadvertently, since participant turnover can be high. "Change" often happens with respect to making improvements, which has a subtle way of suggesting that we are trying to move away from something negative about the past.

### **Daily Activities Involving Collaboration**

The meetings that have been discussed above would occur at major points of class planning and overlap with the typical planning meetings that are already held by the teaching staff alone. Based on the schedule described, these would not require more time than is already used. They would be ways to include participants in the planning process and help the participants to contribute ideas not only to the kinds of learning content most important to them but also to the educational environment that is created, the kinds of policies that are used in the classroom, and the relationship that is formed between the teaching staff and participants.

Some other tools that were discussed in our CCT workshop could also be implemented at the "classroom" level, which means that these activities could help the participants to take part in how the daily classes are run. Because of variations in schedule and other life distractions that can influence participant attendance in class and ability to follow through on assignments, it should be noted that classroom "plans" need to be flexible themselves. Even though the various planning meetings described above will hopefully help to enhance the educational experience of both participants and teachers, we teachers find that we need to be open to changing the class plan on any given day. I would like to start to utilize the following kinds of activities directly in my classroom as a way of "checking in" on the participants and their needs on a fairly frequent basis.

### **Focused Conversation**

In this activity, the class will be presented with the questions formed using the Objective/Reflective/Interpretive/Decisional structure defined in Appendix A of this plan. These are based on the topic of "How This Class Has Prepared You for Your Future". As the teacher, I will take part in answering the questions along with our participants, and this structure will help us to keep on track with class planning input from the past as well as provide an ongoing way for participants to contribute their ideas.

### **Circle of Allies**

This activity will be useful perhaps not with the planning process itself but with the sense of community in the classroom. Because of the wide cultural diversity in a given class, participants have expressed that they would like to get to know each other more but do not get a chance to socialize in

their classes. By using the Circle of Allies on a weekly basis, we will help to find common ground between the participants and also with me as the teacher. I will particularly be using this activity on days when a new student enters the class (which may happen at irregular times because the program tries to maintain a constant enrollment number even if in the middle of a term).

### Open Space

A modified version of this activity will help to support the need to give individual attention to students with varying levels of understanding of the content areas within class. For example, a class on "Job Searching" might involve many topics that can be overwhelming to participants when considered together. Specific Open Space discussions might correspond to these topics, such as "developing an effective resume", "Internet job searching techniques", and "having a positive job interview". Facilitators will be determined based on participant interest, and all participants will move between discussions as they find appropriate with the understanding that they may contribute information if they have experience in these topics or just mainly listen if they need more insight into the topics. It will be particularly instructive to me as a teacher to observe which topics show the greatest interest, for this will serve as a cue to me to develop learning exercises that concentrate on those topics in more detail.

### Cooperative Response

This activity could be used frequently in the class, and I hope to establish this as a daily practice. Even though much of our class time addresses fairly static procedural information within GED preparedness (such as adding fractions, evaluating grammar), there is also much opportunity for true problem-solving. One example of such an opportunity is in deciding how to cover topics in class when it is clear that we do not have enough time for everything. As a class, we could practice the Cooperative Response by answering a question such as, "what should we do if we run out of time before covering everything today?" I believe that this will not only help us to practically find solutions without judgment, but also it will help the participants to feel comfortable that we are not ignoring something that is important. Because of the way that this activity may work in more spontaneous situations, I will need to continue developing my sensitivity to the moments when it is appropriate.

### Conflict Spectrum

I would like to use a modified form of the Conflict Spectrum more spontaneously when I determine that participants are having trouble with the content in a particular class session or seem detached in some way. Possible areas of conflict could address more subjective conditions such as "I am interested in this topic", "I am having trouble understanding today", "The teacher has explained the topic well today", and "I have learned something today that I will be able to use later". This will also help me to understand better how and when I need to explain a topic in a different way or provide tutoring assistance to particular participants.

### Applications to the Broader Agency

Several agency resources are available that may help with implementing these meetings and activities. First, the agency has recently started a new program in "Civic Engagement", and a purpose of the program is to help find ways to involve members of the community in becoming more active in the core neighborhood issues such as safety, local politics, transportation, housing, and preserving and growing the culture of the South End. Although this program tends to address those individuals in the neighborhood who do not necessarily participate in our classes, the manager of the program is knowledgeable about community organizing and may be able to contribute additional ideas about involving the broader community in class planning, outside of the individuals who are already enrolled. Also, an eventual goal of the Civic Engagement is to encourage all agency staff to understand and use the tools of civic engagement within themselves as well as with all agency participants. I feel that he and I could be resources for each other in advocating changes in the broader agency that improve our collaboration.

I participate in some staff meetings in which experiments in collaboration activities might be appropriate. I hope to start with my smaller group of managers of adult programs and suggest that we open our meetings with a brief Circle of Allies activity. I consider this a long-term challenge since many staff have expressed hesitation when participating in "ice breaker" or related activities, so I know that I need to start a process of suggesting how different styles of conversation can help address certain needs, to the best of my current understanding. I know that I need to become more vocal about advocating new organizational development approaches as an internal staff member who has no formal responsibility within those areas. In a time when an opportunity to champion a new style of thinking in the organization is present, this is an area in which I feel most strongly. One other idea is that the agency had previously formed an "HR Committee" (before my time of employment) which tried to address some human resources needs, but the committee evolved to simply evaluate benefits plans. Interest in the committee declined when that task was complete, and staff expressed some uncertainty at the real value of continuing to work together because they realized that they lacked knowledge of legal issues that would be needed to address more serious HR needs. I plan to revive a similar idea in the form of a "Professional Development Committee", which would be a low-commitment way for interested staff members to start to meet together to discuss what this concepts means to us. I feel that such a committee would be a great way to experiment with collaboration activities as well as discuss how to bring them to the larger organization. I believe that one initial order of business for the committee would be to help develop a new staff orientation, which does not exist currently. New staff are only oriented to the agency by direct explanation by their own program's manager, which really only tends to reinforces the separation that occurs between the various programs.

### Evaluating Results

Concerning my own implementation of the organizational tools that will be used in class planning meetings, there are several measures that will be taken to evaluate results. First, a brief qualitative survey can be developed to capture feedback from both the participants and staff about their feelings, ideas, and concerns about the *process* that we are using in our meetings and classes. Quantitative measurements will be made as well. Particularly for participants, we will measure and track the “drop-out” rate. Because the GED and other employability programs can take variable time for participants, there is no set academic calendar - they are able to proceed at their own pace and remain in the program as long as they are otherwise in good standing. Because some participants decide to leave the program rather than complete it, we will need to look for indications that the participants are remaining in the program longer and dropping out less often. For the participants that complete the program by obtaining their GED or finishing other computer and employability classes, we will need to find indications that they are spending less time getting to that point once they first enroll. A core metric in the program is basic attendance percentage. We have observed that more frequent attendance by participants correlates strongly with mastering the class material and completing the classes. By using the collaboration methods in our planning, I hope to find that participants do show greater attendance as a result of having more primary ownership in the planning process of their own education. Additionally, I would like to keep track of referrals to the program from current participants and the number of participants that return to serve as volunteer classroom tutors. We have found that referrals happen when a current participant is pleased with his or her own progress in the classes, and he or she is also more willing to return and help current students pass through the classes. By tracking this information, we hope to achieve the following: reduced student attrition, quicker completion of the program classes, and increased interaction between staff and participants, particularly in the form of much more participant-initiated conversations and suggestions to the teaching staff.

### Challenges to Increasing Our Collaboration

As suggested previously, disruption to our normal program planning will be minimized, since the participant involvement in planning meetings will not take more time that we use already for our regular teacher planning sessions. It may take time to institutionalize the idea that participants are necessarily part of this process and therefore are needed in attendance. Regarding the daily classroom activities though, our “check-in” activities will mean that we will need to suspend our attention to the actual subject matter of the class to take part in the activity. Although this may seem like a disruption, I believe we will make up for the loss because we would ultimately waste less time in classroom situations that are not effective for the participants. In terms of the broader agency, I believe that these activities will cause little disruption because some of our collaboration tools can fit into other meetings and be adjusted for time as needed. I realize that I am also making an underlying assumption that I will need to commit to a long-term process of advocating the idea of organizational collaboration to all staff



and find allies among them who are willing to participate beyond their defined job roles. I am not expecting that any of this Plan for Practice will result in immediate buy-in or complete agreement, for that matter. With both staff and participants, I also realize that it must be explained that all are part of the process of setting the ground rules of collaboration and that we are allowed to make any decisions that make the process safer for all. This might include providing openings for someone to leave a given activity or not participate at all. I have found it very effective in my classes so far to explicitly label a classroom activity as an "experiment", meaning that I am revealing to participants that it may not work well, that they are welcome to provide feedback and criticisms, and that we can build upon and change the parts that do work well.

### Conclusion

While considering and developing this Plan of Practice, I have found some great insight and hope for following up on the implementation. First, I understand that as an advocate of improving collaboration, I must find the language to communicate both verbally and in written form to help others understand these ideas. Other than using some occasional "icebreakers", there is no format that the agency has defined to express how we collaborate. I can see how staff may become disillusioned at times and feel only greater isolation in our agency. By developing this plan, I feel a much deeper personal commitment to the activities and therefore find more ways to related them to the practical daily work that we are doing. A personal commitment that I have made through this plan is that I will "endow" the participants with more responsibility in developing their own education and be free to express the uniqueness that each person brings. Because of past school experiences, the participants may enter our classes feeling that it is like the schooling from their past, and most of these situations seemed to have been repressive. I feel a great relief from giving up my status as the Teacher and am greatly encouraged to establish that I, other teaching staff, and participants are truly equal in the class planning process. I may have been too willing to take all of that responsibility of the Teacher and try to control the classroom environment, plan for every situation, and take into account learning differences and cultural understanding. Personally, this has been some cause of stress since it has probably been a way for me to receive a form of superficial "credit" for doing good work but actually has been holding me back from encouraging true collaboration. From considering all of these factors in our class planning, I now also much more greatly appreciate the kinds of diversity in our classes, particularly from the perspective of being able to more greatly understand their different intrinsic motivations for continuing their education. Because I too identify very strongly with my own motivations, I feel like I can find common ground with the participants and use it to "humanize" our classroom experience as someone who does facilitate the learning of others. I am greatly excited about the possibilities ahead.

## Appendix A

Focused Conversation: How Has This Class Prepared You For Your Future?

### Objective Questions

What classroom activities have been used in class?

How have you organized your materials, handouts, and schedules?

What does our classroom look like? Describe the arrangement of the room.

How has the teacher interacted with students?

### Reflective Questions

What have you liked the most about the class?

What have you liked the least about the class?

Who are the people most important to you in encouraging you to advance your education?

How do you feel about your own progress?

What style of learning is best for you?

### Interpretive Questions

How will your education improve your job prospects?

How will your education improve your family life?

What does it mean to have a "fun" class?

### Decisional Questions

What topics from class should be reviewed again?

Which activities should we continue, and which ones should be stop using?

What will you tell other people in your life about your progress in your classes?