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## Shaping Communities Through Extension Programs

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## Shaping Communities Through Extension Programs

### Abstract

A community's essence, which is the combination of its identity, purpose, and culture, is dynamic. It is influenced or shaped in part by what the community knows. Extension, through its educational programs, plays a large part in creating community knowledge. This article shows how Extension educators can extend and accelerate the community-shaping process by using action research processes like Appreciative Inquiry. It also describes the Porch Cookie Project, one adaptation of Appreciative Inquiry.

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## Introduction

Communities are highly sophisticated human systems. They are shaped by the actions of their members. These actions are not taken without some thought and consideration. But what informs the thought and consideration? It is fair to suggest that what members of a community *know* determines their course of action and ultimately shapes their community. This makes knowledge a powerful tool in the community-shaping process. It might even be said that what a community knows about itself becomes its destiny.

Because knowledge is such a powerful element in the shaping process, educational programs that create knowledge are one of the most important activities in any community. In communities all across the United States, Extension, through its educational programs, plays a significant role in the knowledge-creation process and therefore is instrumental in shaping communities.

In this article we explore how Extension can use a collaborative action research process known as Appreciative Inquiry to create the kind of knowledge that will be a powerful force for positive change. The strength of this knowledge creating process is its ability to:

- Release positive conversation within the community,
- Build an ever-expanding web of inclusion and positive relationships,
- Create self-reinforcing learning communities,
- Bolster democracy and self-organizing throughout the community, and
- Provide a reservoir of strength and unleash a positive revolution of change (Ludema, 2001).

## Understanding the Context

Before explaining Appreciative Inquiry and its use, we would like to describe our image of the context in which this work is done. A community is not just an economic or political system but also "something deeper and more intangible—a common identity, purpose, and culture that bind

people together" (Nozick, 1999). In this article we refer to these three aspects as the essence of a community. This essence is created through a rich interplay of "the collective/social history of a place, the geographic or natural history of a place, the values that people share, and the ways that people live, work, and play together" (Nozick, 1999).

Because people grow and develop, the ways they invent to live, work, and play together change. Therefore, the essence of a community is constantly changing. People moving into and out of the community also generate change. For the most part, people choose to live in a community that has an essence to which they can relate.

Diverse or homogeneous, urban or rural, professional or blue collar, people select a community with which they believe they have or want to have the most in common. They bring with them their own identity, purpose, culture, and images of what a community should be. These elements eventually get merged into a collective community essence. The process is parallel to the process in which two people from different families get married and create new traditions. The collective merging of beliefs, experiences, present conditions, and future desires for the community is constantly shaping community essence.

In most communities the process is slow and steady. The primary factors influencing change are changes in the residents and changes in the environment surrounding the community. Sometimes the change is intentional. Indianapolis, for example, chose to become known as the amateur sports capital of the world. Sometimes the change is not intentional, as in the aftermath of the 2000 presidential election, when it became clear that Tallahassee and not Miami is the capital of Florida. In changing Tallahassee's identity, its essence was changed. Sometimes the community change process occurs rapidly due to outside events. For example, the attack on the World Trade Center changed the essence of New York City almost instantaneously.

Essence is created in part by the way people live, work, and play together. It is drawn from its members' deepest values and beliefs, not only about the past and the present but also about the future. If community members believe their work includes being an important port city for the nation or a county seat in a small rural state, they "live into that image" of themselves. Community members invest their material wealth and power to maintain that essence.

In a sense, a community's essence is its reason for being and the prime motivation for resident action on behalf of the community. A good example of this is Cleveland, Ohio. Cleveland thinks of itself as a major city in the U.S. with all the amenities of a major city. When the Cleveland Browns football team threatened to and eventually did leave Cleveland, the community was galvanized into action. Cleveland could not imagine itself without a NFL team. They did whatever was necessary to get another team.

The point here is that, as Nozick (1999) has suggested, material wealth and power are not the community. Instead they are resources that have been and are being used by the community to achieve its essence. In the remainder of this article we discuss how, through the educational process, Extension can enter into the dynamic process of change and make positive changes in the essence of communities.

## **How Extension Programs Shape Community**

Our root assumption about communities is that they are open-ended, indeterminate systems capable of becoming more than they are at any given moment and of learning how to actively take part in guiding their own evolution. One resource communities use while learning to engage in their own evolution is the knowledge created in Extension programs. What people know about themselves, their history, their community, and the world around them shapes their image of what is possible for their community.

Extension's goal is to teach people things that make their life better. It measures effectiveness by measuring changes in behavior.

- Is the community more able to recognize and use the leadership abilities of all citizens?
- Are there fewer teens pregnant?
- Are there more jobs in the community?
- Are there more successful kids in the community?
- Is the community more able to make collective decisions that are supported by the community as a whole?
- Is more land being no-till farmed?

As Extension educators address these important issues in communities, they share knowledge and embedded values that community members use to build images, skills, and practices. These images, skills, and practices shape the way people live, work, and play together. By virtue of the knowledge created in Extension programs, community members become better parents, elected officials, farmers, business owners, students, volunteer leaders, and citizens. All these new behaviors interact to collectively re-shape the community.

## **Appreciative Inquiry**

As described above, communities collectively create their essence. By using processes that focus

on community members at their very best and the self-organizing aspects of their communities, Extension can simultaneously extend and accelerate the rate of desired behavioral change and therefore improve effectiveness. Although there are a number of possible processes, the remainder of this article discusses Appreciative Inquiry, which has been used by an Extension educator to accelerate the community-shaping process.

Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000) is a form of action research that "has the capacity to challenge the guiding assumptions of the culture, to raise fundamental questions regarding contemporary social life, to foster reconsideration of that which is 'taken for granted' and thereby furnish new alternatives for social actions" (Gergen, 1978). During an Appreciative Inquiry, a community goes through four phases:

- Discovering the best of what is.
- Dreaming about what might be.
- Designing an ideal future.
- Delivering action to transform the community.

### **Discovering the Best of What Is**

To accelerate the community-shaping process, Appreciative Inquiry focuses on the social arrangements that "work" for the community. By "work" we mean community activities that excite, energize, and inspire members. After engaging in these activities, community members describe themselves as feeling more alive and more positive about their life and their community.

Appreciative Inquiry is designed to leave community members with a sense of agency and efficacy. When Extension educators encourage them to point out moments when they have been excited, energized, or inspired while living in their community, community members can see that healthy vibrant community is possible in their specific context. They have created new knowledge about themselves and their community. They make a connection between the choices they have made for their community and their most deeply held values. In those moments they begin to see how their values are being played out in their social arrangements, for example, in:

- Methods for citizen involvement,
- Style of community leadership,
- Types of relational networks,
- Decision-making practices,
- Project-implementation processes, and
- Communication techniques.

### **Dreaming About What Might Be**

An intense look at the most positive choices made by the community begins to simultaneously focus members on their ultimate concerns and expand their images of what might be possible. As Ludema (2000) suggests, ultimate concerns are the most deeply held values, ideas, and beliefs, which give life meaning:

Various authors suggest that not all human vocabularies have an equal capacity to inspire hope. Hope is generated and is sustained when people, facing the mystery of the future, dialogue about their highest human ideals--that which Plato calls the good, the true, and the beautiful; Marcel calls universal values; Bloch calls the absolute, infinite, and unobtainable other; Otto calls the holy; and Fromm calls the transcendent or the spiritual. Tillich's (1957) treatment of 'ultimate concern' provides language that illustrates what these authors all seem to be pointing toward. He defines ultimate concerns as those things that sustain and give meaning to life (p. 275).

During the second phase of an Appreciative Inquiry, community members' imaginations about what is possible for their community begin to expand. Members are drawn into conversations that are grounded in the knowledge created in the Discovery phase and focused on the future of the community.

### **Designing an Ideal Future**

In the third phase of an Appreciative Inquiry, community members use the knowledge created in the first two phases to redesign, in large and small ways, the social, political, economic, and physical aspects of their community. Community members engage in a dialogue that is focused on the question, "In what other ways can we organize our social, political, economic, or physical lives that will build on the life-giving forces and factors we have discovered in our community?"

As community members work to answer this question, they begin to invent new and more value congruent ways of living and working together. Engaging in the dialogue yields concrete ideas and projects that are aligned directly with the community's most deeply held values.

### **Delivering Actions**

It is important to recognize that the Appreciative Inquiry does not stop with the formation of projects. Rather, the activities related to carrying out the projects during the Delivery phase will continue to generate new ideas and dreams. An analogy would be to think of the Delivery phase as

the playing of jazz music. Community members will gain energy from innovation and improvisation upon a basic template rather than following an already perfected score. Therefore, a crucial piece of the Deliver phase is a formative evaluation process that draws attention to the moments when community members are particularly energized and engaged with each other. The goal is to identify and build on those moments as projects are implemented.

Projects created during the Design phase emerge from members' best experiences of living in their community. As a result, the projects are automatically aligned with members' ultimate concerns. This alignment means that projects implemented during the Delivery phase will garner greater support with less conflict and therefore have a greater chance of success than projects created during traditional community development processes.

### **One Adaptation--The Porch Cookie Project**

The simplicity of the Porch Cookie Project (PCP) masks its elegance and power. This adaptation of Appreciative Inquiry came from a fond childhood memory of sitting on the porch and eating cookies, drinking lemonade, and talking with friends and neighbors. The goal of PCPs is to transform such positive memories into community knowledge, which ultimately shapes the community.

Simultaneously, it builds relationships among community members by bringing them together to talk about their best experiences of living in their community. This conversation leads to dialogue about their ultimate concerns. The PCP also builds three of Benson's 40 Developmental Assets by focusing on positive family communication, developing positive adult non-parent relationships, and building caring neighborhoods (Benson, Galbraith, & Espeland, 1998).

Because it is done outdoors, a PCP is best done over a 2- or 3-month period of good weather. Although most Porch Cookie gatherings are intended to generate conversation about the community, they can focus on a specific theme such as family or literacy. The subject must, however, be intentionally affirmative. That is, it must draw on community members' positive experiences.

A PCP can be initiated in a month or less with a core group. The first step is to find individuals who have had positive "porch" experiences while growing up. If community members grew up without porches, they should draw on other positive experiences of community from their youth. This could include anything from sitting on the front stoop to playing basketball together. The best way to find people who will help is to ask people to talk about their positive experiences. This is the moment when the PCP begins and is actually the first step in the knowledge-creation process.

During a PCP, members of the core group encourage other community members to host Porch Cookie gatherings at their home, office, business, or other appropriate location. Porch Cookie gatherings' hosts invite their neighbors, friends, colleagues, or constituents over to sit on the porch, deck, or under a tree to sip lemonade, enjoy cookies, or whatever snack they choose, and talk. Questions like the following are used to stimulate the conversation.

- What are some of your best childhood memories?
- When have you felt good about living in this community?
- What was going on at that time?
- Who is your community hero?
- What's the best gift you ever received from someone in the community?

Publicity is essential to create the most new knowledge through a PCP. Enrolling the local news media is helpful, as is distributing flyers about the project through schools, community organizations, and direct mailings. To engage as many people as possible, find media representatives who are willing to share their own positive stories of living in the community and who will support the idea. Ask them to participate in a Porch Cookie gathering and then share the results with the community. Publishing stories and pictures in the newspaper can also spread the good news about the community's capacity to create a positive community. Other key people to involve are elected officials, directors of non-profit organizations, block watch captains, church leaders, and representatives of other visible, active groups and organizations.

After a Porch Cookie gathering, community members are invited to send a picture of their gathering or a special story told at their gathering to a central location. Prizes can be given each week to encourage people to send pictures or stories. Pictures can also be displayed at local events, such as the county fair, or in other public places, such as local grocery stores, churches, synagogues, and mosques. The local library can even offer Porch Cookie gathering kits. In addition to creating new knowledge about the community, the volume of pictures and the number of times the kits are used are good indicators of involvement.

Either during or following each of the gatherings, the host follows up with guests to gather information about their conversations. What did they talk to other guests about? What did they like about the gathering? What are they now wondering about? The information is then shared with PCP organizers, who synthesize the information and publicize it.

Sharing the knowledge created during the gatherings with the larger community is an important step in the shaping process. If positive stories about a community are rarely disseminated,

communities think of them as exceptions rather than the rule. When positive stories about a community are regularly shared, communities begin to include them in their image of the essence of the community. They become part of what community members "know" about their community and therefore inform their actions.

## Results

The initial PCP was started 4 years ago in a county with 71,000 people. Thus far, 65 Porch Cookie gatherings have been documented. However, the extensive publicity, which invited people throughout the county to host a Porch Cookie gathering, makes it impossible to determine exactly how many have been held.

Because communities are large complex systems, the effectiveness of programs like the PCP are best observed over a long period of time. It is, however, possible to document immediate changes. To measure change in the initial community, one-on-one interviews were used. Three typical hosts were interviewed and asked about their experience of hosting a Porch Cookie gathering. One of the interviewees talked about the PCP kick-off gathering, one talked about a business-centered gathering, and one talked about a neighborhood-centered gathering. All three considered their gathering a very positive experience. They all met new people and renewed old relationships. They each described being inspired by moments when they saw others build stronger relationships.

The person who hosted the kick-off gathering, to which the public was invited, described multiple conversations that either created or strengthened relationships. The theme for Porch Cookie gatherings that year was literacy, which spawned several gatherings at community members' homes throughout the summer. During the interview she described a father and a daughter who strengthened their relationship by making cookies for their own gathering. They each invited people they knew to the gathering, which built bridges across generations. The event left the host with a sense of hope for the future. She believed that there was value in being in relationship with others from her community.

The person who hosted the business-centered gathering owns a childcare center. The goal of her gathering was to build stronger relationships with the parents of the children who come to her center. She said that at first the parents were reserved and did not interact with each other. But the children ultimately pulled the parents into the activities. They introduced their mothers and fathers to their friends' mothers and fathers. That opened the door for the parents to start talking. As the children explained to the parents how they had made the cookies and how to play the games, the parents began to build relationships with the childcare owner and the other parents. The children were very proud of making the cookies, and it gave the parents a new image of what their children could do. After the gathering, the childcare owner reported that her interactions with the parents were greatly improved, making it possible for united effort on developmental issues.

The person who hosted the neighborhood gathering invited her neighbors and a colleague from work, who in turn invited other work colleagues. The gathering, as she described it, grew beyond the original neighborhood event into an event combining neighbors and other friends. Her intent was to get to know her neighbors in a different way. Inviting them to her home made it a different experience. Her most positive experience was with her neighbor's granddaughter. Prior to the gathering the child was shy and generally didn't speak to the host when they saw each other. The host described the gathering as a time when the child was able to be a bit more playful and talkative. Now the child isn't afraid to come into the host's yard and talk to her. The host suggested that what comes out of Porch Cookie gatherings is trust among neighbors and colleagues. She suggested that it was the kind of trust that has one believe that people can do things together.

In addition to these formal interviews, reports of additional Porch Cookie gatherings included descriptions of community members having improved neighbor-to-neighbor relationships as measured by increased number of conversations. The reports also included improved intergenerational relationships, indicated by a larger number of adults interacting with youth. Adults and children reported reading to each other important stories about life and living in community. One elected official listened to constituents by holding a Porch Cookie gathering at his own home. There were also reports of culture transfer through the sharing of traditions and family stories at Porch Cookie gatherings.

## Conclusions

Communities are shaped through relational actions that can be and are influenced in a number of crucial ways by the knowledge created in Extension programs. There is an opportunity for Extension community development professionals to extend and accelerate the change process. Bringing people together by getting them to reflect on their positive experiences of living in community can be a powerful tool for understanding and then building healthy communities. Methodologies like Appreciative Inquiry and tools like the Porch Cookie Project are constructive ways to help communities create new knowledge that aligns with their ultimate concerns.

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