

Looking for the worms

This summer I've immersed myself four weeks in the world of ABCD in Gloucestershire, in the world and the work of the Barnwood Trust - You're Welcome - and Nurture Development. I live in Holland, nearby Amsterdam. At home I'm engaged in my neighbourhood and different grassroots initiatives and as a freelancer I'm working as a trainer and an ABCD practitioner.

On 21st July I joined one of the Barnwood Trust workshops, 'Community Building in Practice' in Bishops Cleeve. It was led by Richard Holmes, of the Barnwood Trust, and Cormac Russell, the Managing Director of Nurture Development. A total of 15 people from Gloucestershire participated. Some of them are committed community members and many are professionals working for social sector organisations and services.



In this blog I'm going to highlight six elements I came across during the workshop.

Birgit Oelkers

The Worm Story of John McKnight

"I love to go to the West of Ireland to the little villages. Last year we rented a little house there with a lake nearby. I love fish and wanted to go fishing, but I didn't have any bait, so I went to a little store in the village and asked the gentleman there: 'Do you have any bait?' He asked: 'What do you mean by 'bait'?' 'Well', I said, 'like worms.' He couldn't believe it. He said: 'on your way to my store, did you see those three big white stones? I think if you go out there and turn one of these stones around, you'll find a lot of worms.' This is the great, great lesson of my own: 'All around you there is everything you are looking for'. Which is hard to see if you think the way to have a good life is to buy.. So that's why, being a consumer, you never see what's there." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=veRV9bNSJaE>

This story is part of John McKnight's keynote speech at the ABCD festival <http://blog.nurturedevelopment.org/2015/06/26/asset-based-community-development-festival-2015/> which took place in June 2015. Richard Holmes brings John's story in because it catches one of the most important shifts that ABCD is about. And it leads us to the thread questions for this workshop: *What can local communities do for themselves? When do services and councils have to get out of the way? And what can you do to be supportive to communities?*

1. ABCD is challenging stuff. It starts with yourself

Richard and Cormac warn that it can be quite confrontational to get involved with ABCD. This is because ABCD is about people, about what they bring into it and all assets that they have. 'We have to bring our whole selves into the space. It's deeply challenging stuff. You are revealing so much more about yourself and others than you expected. It can be a bit uncomfortable because you have to ask yourself different questions without immediately knowing the answers.'

That's also what this group experiences when Richard asks them "what is your role in your family, in your work, your friendships and in your community?" It leads to a bit of confusion and some more question marks such as *'I don't know what my role in my community is.....nobody asks us about that, we lost touch with our neighbours.... how can I help others figure out what their role could be in their community when I don't know what my own role is?'*

2. The impact of ABCD on the client-server relationship

One of the issues ABCD offers is a new perspective on the relationship between clients and professionals. Many of the participants have a client/server relationship. In a body language exercise it becomes clear that the powerful part is in the server. Whatever s/he does to listen sincerely and be nice that does not change the balance of power. The server is in the role of expert (has solutions and the idea s/he can fix the client), and the client/patient is dependent on care, on what the server has to offer (s/he is not capable and expects to be fixed).

How might this balance change when the relationship is based on ABCD? Standing on a chair as a client, looking down on the server, shows how the division of power has completely changed. The patient is no longer the one who waits, the client no longer the one who lies on his back. The expert is no longer the expert and rescuer, but one others can contribute to.

Cormac explains that ABCD doesn't aim for a better client/server relationship, but enables citizenship. It's not meant to make clients happy, but to shift the relationship between client and helper... and to give clients the tools to find their own approach with support from their communities.

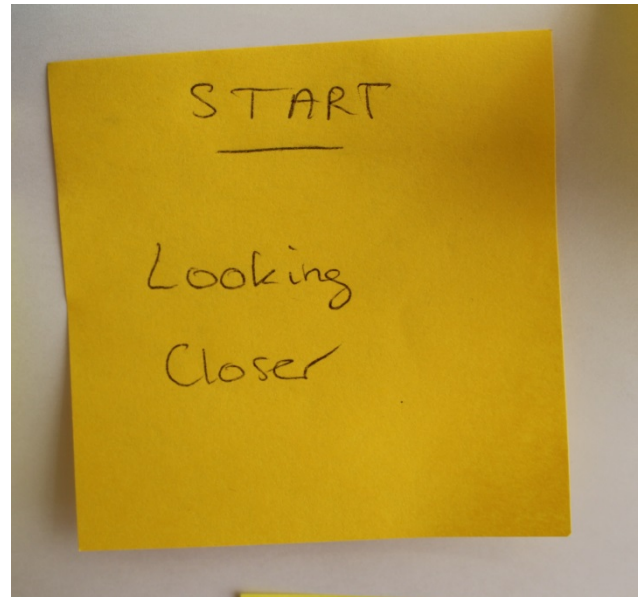


3. How to support a community in an asset-based way?

You only know what you can contribute as a server, when you know what a community already has and wants to go along with. ABCD always starts with what's strong, not with what's wrong, and with exploring all the assets a community has. The skills, the stories, the places, the local economy, the things happening on the doorsteps, the initiatives, the hidden treasures and little elephant trails. The nurturing, love, friendship... All those things communities can do and services cannot deliver. This kind of asset mapping is not about gathering data and numbers, it's about connections and building relationships. It's community mapping. You can't do it *for* people, only *with* people. You need to have the confidence to start an open conversation and to take a closer look, to go out there, to get to know what issues the community thinks to need more attention. The hidden assets are only to be seen when you stop minding about 'programmes' and organisational targets. That brings us to the worm story of John McKnight.

4. Everything is right around you. Look for the worms under the stone.

The most valuable assets of a community are often invisible. Very often even for communities themselves, until the assets are identified and people are invited to use them. And for people from outside the community, these assets are mostly completely invisible, particularly for services, because an institutional vision based on needs and targets is not geared to focusing on everyday community assets as these are so often 'unspectacular' and not taken seriously. You have to look at things another way, as the worm story of John McKnight shows us.



Cormac illustrates this with a story about an accidental asset mapping during a walk in Cheltenham with another workshop group. "During

the walk we pass a military store with many weird and wonderful things in the window. We went in and talked to Steve about selling military equipment, wondering who could be his customers. He told us more about the people coming to his store and mentioned also a group of ten old men who had served in several wars. They meet each other every Friday morning in his store. He said 'This world, my Friday morning group, is completely invisible for you, isn't it? You make maps of people like me. In your world you think you're the only one who thinks about health.' Steve would never come to a meeting a service invited him to. He thinks people like us are weird. But he would welcome very warmly you if you walked into his place. So, look for the worms under the stone."

5. Getting closer to a community by having more learning conversations

For learning conversations with a community it helps to have open questions which shine a light on what's important for that community. Questions which concentrate on primary assets. Richard mentions some examples:



1. What do you care about that makes you act?
2. What needs attention in your community *by* the community?
What floats your boat?
3. What assets do you have? Which assets can you use?
4. Who else do you know who can help? Who's good for a favour?
5. Which external forces are necessary for you to fly in?

And it helps a lot when you know what moves people. There are five ways in which people are motivated that Cormac keeps up his sleeve:

- Care: stuff we are in for, where we go for.
- Concern: about what and whom we love and don't want to be harmed or threatened by.
- Connections: building relationships, being in connection with others or actually getting space for yourself from others; having fun with each other.
- Change: going for a better world, stand up for social justice.
- Contribution: the desire to contribute. Everyone with a gift is very willing to share it.

ABCD is sharing stories

Sharing and spreading stories is one of the strongest forms of guidance in ABCD. The stories the workshop participants share about community life show the richness and variety, the power and lightness of communities, and the fun and pride of community members doing things together. Such as

- the hideous, dark and smelly underpass, which young community members and a street artists made usable and beautiful
- the playing fields the community is looking after
- the transforming of an unsafe and filthy area in a green, lovable place

... and a lots of other community stories!

All the learning issues and the different kinds of learning in this workshop – working in big and small groups, telling stories, doing body language exercises, having great food for lunch - gave a perspective on what community driven work can mean in practice.



A group of participants go home with the plan to go on in a kind of community of practice. And they fill a whole basket full of changing ideas to take home. Here are some impressions....

What to start with. "Thinking more about what I can do in my community... Looking closer....Having longer conversations with the neighbours....Thinking big, doing it small. ...Actively thinking about learning conversations and what motivates people to act. "

What to continue. "To care...Being a good neighbour. ...Doing the things I enjoy, even when my husband tells me the water is too cold. Meeting and talking to more people in my village....Being a good listener. Building links and getting out and talking to people. Listening to new ideas....Laughing!"



What to stop. "Trying to impose 'solutions' so readily. Stopping negativity...and thinking at an

organisational level. When hitting a brick wall, not giving up that easily. Having conversations with people without pre-planned agendas...Stopping telling people that they need to do what I suggest.“

Everything we need for change is already there. We don't have to wait for permission or the right moment. The harvest of serious and hilarious intentions for tomorrow shows that we literally can start the next day. Just start with sharing community stories and try to make the invisible more visible. As Marcel Proust said: *“The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.”*

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