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4. “THE POLITICS OF RESPONSIBILITY” REVISITED

An Analysis of Power as a Central Construct in Program Planning

PROGRAM PLANNING AND POWER

Adult educators are continually planning courses, seminars and other educational events. This might be considered by some as primarily a routine and straightforward “management” activity only vaguely connected to pedagogy and quite distant from politics and ethics. But planning is far from an interest-free, neutral or solely managerial practice. It is a social practice and often requires creative action performed within structured power relations that may be clearly visible or hidden, symmetrical or asymmetrical. How do adult educators make decisions and act responsibly within these relations? What helps them theoretically to read and respond to such power relations? What capabilities are required by program planners in the current global context of growing inequality, environmental degradation, political instability, forced displacement and economic uncertainty?

This chapter is based partly on the claim that program planning – and the concepts and theoretical models that underpin it – are central to adult education practice (Käpplinger & Sork, 2014). Program planning has been regarded in the US, Canada and Germany as a “core competency” in most professional preparation programs for adult educators (e.g., CPAE, 2008). There is some evidence that it is increasingly regarded as important in other regions of the world although it may be labelled differently (Käpplinger, Popovic, Shah, & Sork, 2015).

Nonetheless, there is still no global consensus on its importance or what should be included in courses on program planning. This sort of cross-national comparative work is of interest to us because it has the potential to inform policy discussions about the prospects of globally-transferable competencies.

Our goal in this chapter is to establish the relevance and importance of scholarship on program planning to questions of power and possibility. We do this by focusing primarily on the evolution of power as a central construct in planning theory, and how power is addressed – or not – in contemporary planning models as well as the capabilities required of program planners. We give particular attention to the influential work of Cervero and Wilson and acknowledge the influence of feminism, postmodernism, critical theory, postcolonial studies, and other intellectual currents

that have challenged conventional understandings of what responsible practice involves in adult education and in related fields.

FOREGROUNDING SOCIAL DYNAMICS

In *The Politics of Responsibility* Cervero and Wilson (1994a) proposed a theory of program planning – elaborated more fully in Cervero and Wilson (1994b, 2006) – that has been used to frame research studies (e.g., Cervero & Wilson, 1996) and incorporated into planning texts (e.g., Caffarella & Daffron, 2013). Power and interests are key concepts within this framework which emphasizes the central role negotiation plays in the responsible design of adult education programs. They define power (after Isaac, 1987) as “... the capacity to act, distributed to people by virtue of the enduring social relationships in which they participate” and define interests (after Morgan, 1986, p. 41) as “... complex sets of ‘predispositions embracing goals, values, desires, expectations, and other orientations and inclinations that lead a person to act in one direction or another’” (Cervero & Wilson, 1994b, p. 29). Numerous case studies carried out in a wide range of contexts have provided rich descriptions of typical conflicts encountered as various interests are negotiated – and power exercised – during planning (e.g., Bracken, 2011; Cervero & Wilson, 1996; Maruatona & Cervero, 2004; Ryu & Cervero, 2011). Studies based on their theory make it clear that successful program planners must negotiate in flexible, creative and imaginative ways within continuously changing contexts and often challenging, asymmetrical power relations.

Based on our own teaching experience, Cervero and Wilson’s theory seems to resonate more with experienced planners – rather than novice planners – because it not only recognizes the central role of power in planning but also because they illustrate – through a wide range of case studies – the variety of ways planners can exercise their power and how power is exercised on planners. It foregrounds the complex social dynamics that produce the programs made available to learners. Students who have already worked in organizations can provide several examples of how power is exercised and interests negotiated within those settings. They are happy to acquire a language to describe, analyze and critique these dynamics. Novice planners who lack an experiential base seem primarily interested in acquiring basic procedural knowledge and skills. The complexity and lack of a stepwise approach in Cervero and Wilson’s theory irritates or disengages many novices who are often seeking an unambiguous ‘right way’ to plan.

Several studies based on their theory have explored specific tactics planners can use to respond to the power dynamics they encounter. For example, Yang and Cervero (2001) suggested that planners have access to seven “power and influence tactics” they can use depending on the political context: reasoning, consulting, appealing, networking, bargaining, pressuring and counteracting. Their study also categorized four types of planners based on the tactics employed: bystander, tactician, ingratiator and shotgun (p. 292) based on the specific configuration of tactics they use. But what

is less clear is the degree to which the configuration of tactics used can easily be changed by planners when they encounter a different set of power relations or when the power relations shift during planning. In other words, does the planner (with his/her beliefs, knowledge, social embeddedness, disciplinary background, preferences, etc.) choose the configuration of tactics or are the tactics determined or limited by the nature of the power relations encountered?

Cervero and Wilson were not the first to recognize the central role of power in program planning although they certainly raised its profile within adult education and added a decidedly critical spin. In a comprehensive study of what was then an innovative approach to program planning within agricultural extension in the US, Beal et al. (1966) recognized that power was one of several “social system elements” (p. 65) necessary to fully understand the dynamics of program planning. Although by today’s standards their treatment of power might be regarded as narrow or even naïve, they did look closely at how various forms of power influenced the planning process.

It must also be recognized that Cervero and Wilson drew heavily from the work of John Forester who, in 1989, began his influential book, *Planning in the Face of Power*, by observing that “In a world of intensely conflicting interests and great inequalities of status and resources, planning in the face of power is at once a daily necessity and a constant ethical challenge” (p. 3). Forester’s primary audience was those working in community and regional planning, but his book resonated in other fields because it arrived at a time when “critical theory” was increasingly influencing many scholarly debates. Forester has been articulate and persistent in promoting participatory planning processes. In a later book Forester (1999) made the following plea:

Precisely because planning and policy analysis take place in a political world, planners and analysts need to anticipate and respond to foreseeable relationships of power and domination. Precisely because severe inequalities of wealth and power, opportunity and victimization persist in cities and communities, we need practically sensitive, politically realistic, and theoretically insightful accounts of democratizing and advocacy practices. (p. 9)

Such a description and analysis seems valid today and it is perhaps even more important than ever in the current context of major threats to species survival, crisis and increasing social complexity. Informed and reflexive program planning underpinned by a clear theory of power strikes us as a crucial framework for crafting educational responses to these threats and exploring new possibilities in adult education.

THE DOMAINS OF POWER

Power is often perceived critically as manipulative and something exercised by oppressors. But power can also be viewed as a positive source for change. Power understood as *the capacity to act* is neither positive nor negative. The sources,

legitimation and uses of power – and how program planners position themselves toward it – are key messages we take from Cervero and Wilson’s work. However, Sork (2000) makes the case that there is more to planning than knowing how to recognize and deal with power across a variety of domains (see Figure 4.1).

Firstly, program planning requires a high degree of technical prowess and versatility – the technical domain. People have to know how to organize, implement, and manage various processes. These range from budgeting/financing, marketing, target group analysis, needs assessment, scheduling, recruiting instructors, crafting course announcements, interacting with learners, to planning evaluations. These are just a few of the “knowledge islands” – coherent clusters of related knowledge and skills – about which program planners must be aware (Gieseke, 2000). Although such technical tasks are required in many different domains outside of education – and some have their origins outside of education altogether – they must be adapted to the contexts within which adults learn.

Secondly, program planning is a deeply ethical process – the ethical domain. Program planners have to decide how they deal with conflicting interests and asymmetrical power relations. Are they trying to solely serve the interests of the oppressed? Is this realistic in a world of project funding, performance targets, and the varied institutional interests of providers? Is it always clear in a complex world who are the oppressed and who are the oppressors? How does one deal with the inevitable conflicts, dilemmas and paradoxes? Von Hippel (2013) has used the term *antinomy* (a paradox) to demonstrate that there are often conflicts which cannot be mediated leaving program planners to make hard decisions with political and ethical consequences. The seminal work of Freire (1970) is of course crucial, but the binary distinction between “banking education” and the “pedagogy of the oppressed” is not a sufficiently complex perspective through which to understand the many challenges of practice. Responses to the dilemmas planners encounter can rarely be judged as simply right or wrong, good or bad. It is important for planners to reflect critically on their decisions and to understand that even with good intentions, bad outcomes are possible. It is not enough to position oneself in the field of good-minded people who consider their own ideas about what is fair and right as justifying all their decisions and actions. Programs and pedagogical approaches must understand the complicated and diverse interests of the many people involved.

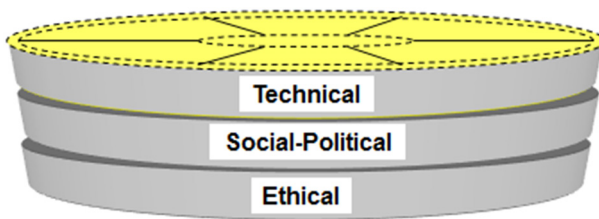


Figure 4.1. Three domains of planning (Sork, 2000, p. 185)

It is important to note that these three domains cannot neatly be separated in practice. They are often deeply interwoven and interacting. For example, conducting a needs analysis may seem to be primarily a technical task – how to do it (questionnaires, interviews, inventories, etc.), but it is also a socio-political activity – whom to do it with (learners, funders, tutors, stakeholders, etc.)? and ethical – whose needs count and how are they being framed? It is likely evident that all this often leads to conflicts and questions about who to include and who to exclude. Cervero and Wilson (2006, p. 6) have used the metaphor of “who has a place at the planning table”¹ in order to stress that there are deliberate decisions made that exclude actors with interests in the program, even when it is considered a highly participatory process. For example, in community education all people cannot always be involved in planning activities; there are real practical constraints on the number and diversity of actors who can be involved in planning. Having too many people involved in planning can lead to paralysis. This illustrates the dilemmas encountered in practice which are worthy of more research and of being problematized more fully in the literature.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE: TO CHANGE OR NOT TO CHANGE?

It is a fundamental characteristic of education and learning that they oscillate between conservative continuity and progressive change. Achieving a balance between change and continuity is more difficult than some might assume.

How program planners deal with change and conflicting interests is crucial. Cervero and Wilson raised this issue by recognizing that planners “act in” but can also “act on” the context. For them, redressing power imbalances detected in planning – levelling the “playing field” – is one important example of acting on the context. Historical program analysis (Käpplinger, 2018) helps us understand how much we are the “children of our time”. Decisions made about whose needs are addressed, what content is included, and how programs are represented in brochures and on websites all reflect the contemporary political, cultural and economic context. Nonetheless, like in sociology, it is important to understand exactly how structure and agency interact. It is especially interesting to question whether planners are mainly *reactive* to the context or where and how they are able to *act on* the context. To what extent do they have the power to bring about a change in the context? In what circumstances *does or should* this happen? Which skills do planners need in order to make such changes in a positive way? Answering these questions requires in-depth analysis of the planning process and of the programs that result.

For example, a recent analysis (Käpplinger & Falkenstern, 2018) demonstrated that health education initiatives focusing on stress and resilience not only make people alert to the problem, but also reflect providers’ commercial interests. Thus, adult education is not only reacting to a growing social problem but providers are also actors with their own (often commercial) interests and could be considered part of the problem. It is a misconception to think that adult educators can only react defensively within the constraints of neo-liberal lifelong learning agendas. But we have agency

and are therefore often complicit in defining and reinforcing these constraints. The role of power within daily practice and how to deal with it are important subjects of study as is how we can exercise agency to overcome constraints.

REDEFINING CAPABILITIES OF PROGRAM PLANNERS

The planning theory of Cervero and Wilson has put power, interests and negotiation in the foreground, but when you place certain concepts in the foreground, they mask or overshadow other concepts and processes that might be equally important in understanding the complexities of planning (Sork, 1996). We close this chapter with our current thoughts on the configuration of capabilities that planners must develop to be effective and responsible professionals in today's complex adult learning landscape. We are aware of competency frameworks (e.g., Research voor Beleid, 2010) and curricula (e.g. Avramovska, Czerwinski, & Lattke, 2015) intended to articulate the basic knowledge and skills required by adult learning professionals – primarily teachers and facilitators – but we find these incomplete when it comes to the role of program planner. In earlier work (Sork, 2000; Käßplinger & Sork, 2014; Käßplinger, Popovic, Shah, & Sork, 2015) we discussed in general terms the capabilities needed by planners, but we now take this opportunity to extend our analysis to reflect more fully the complexity of the role and the challenges of the current age. As we do this, we are also mindful of Gieseke's (2000) metaphor of "planners as seismographs" which, although useful in sensitizing us to the importance of carefully monitoring social, economic, environmental, technological and other developments as they unfold, it also reinforces a "reactive" posture for adult educators. Seismographs only register seismic events as they unfold; they are not predictive of the scope and destructive potential of future events.

We agree with many commentators that we live in perilous times ... socially, politically, economically, environmentally. The current politics of division, unregulated use of technology, massive forced displacement of people, climate change, and growing economic inequality are only five examples of developments that signal major problems now and in the future. We use as a reference point for a more future-oriented perspective on the work of adult educators the *Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* by the United Nations (2015) and the *17 Sustainable Development Goals* (2016) derived from the *Agenda*. Although many educators focus primarily on Goal 4 – Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning – there is a clear role for adult educators in addressing each of the remaining 16 goals. We agree with Steffen (2016) that, "The implementation of the 17 SDGs by 2030 can succeed only through societal rethinking and a change in our political and personal patterns of behavior. This transformation needs a great deal of education, as moral pleas and knowledge transfer based on facts apparently are not enough" (p. 67). We suggest that the challenges to adult education represented by the SDGs can only be addressed by more assertive, politically involved and skilled forms of planning practice.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to propose a comprehensive competency framework for program planners. Although we understand the role that competency frameworks can play in forging greater consistency across professional preparation programs and increasing the portability and recognition of credentials, we are not convinced that a “globally-relevant” competency framework for adult educators is feasible given the diversity of sites of practice, interests, and sociocultural contexts. What we can do is address what we regard as important clusters of capabilities based on Sork’s (2000) three interrelated domains of planning: technical, social-political and ethical.

Being Technically-Capable

Power, understood as the *capacity to act*, is in part a function of being technically capable. There are many technical aspects of program planning that must be mastered if planners are to gain the trust of those they work with. Knowing how to conduct needs assessments, write objectives, prepare budgets and marketing plans, select and hire instructors, organize instructional activities, and develop evaluation plans are all mainly technical skills, although decision-making is often normatively informed. But equally important is the ability to recognize when each of these is required, what their strengths and limitations are as planning tools, and what alternatives might be best suited to a specific planning situation.

The technical-rational mindset critiqued by Cervero and Wilson (1996a) still leads some to regard planning as a collection of tasks to be completed in a prescribed order. In fact, some planners work in organizations that insist on using a prescribed planning model in the mistaken belief that this will ensure greater quality. (For an overview of different planning models, see von Hippel & Käpplinger, 2017).

Doing this may ensure greater consistency, but consistency, quality and responsible practice are not necessarily related. And time spent applying a rigid, prescribed planning process reduces the time that can be devoted to developing more innovative and creative – and higher risk – programs. Program planners who work on “the cutting edge” will occasionally suffer program failures, but failures that come about by trying new, bold approaches to intractable problems and through addressing critical social, economic, political, environmental and other issues should be celebrated – then made subject to careful reflection and learning to find out why they didn’t work as planned (Sork, 1991). Many great ideas needed a second or even third try until they succeeded. As Michael Jordan, the basketball phenomenon, said, “I’ve failed over, over and over again in my life. That’s why I succeed”. It is a mistake to assume that a bold, innovative idea will always work out right from the beginning.

Being Politically-Astute

Reading power relations – and acting within and upon those relations – is at the heart of this cluster of capabilities. Whether the primary form of interaction in planning is

“negotiation” as Cervero and Wilson suggest (2006, pp. 97–98) or some other social process, planners must first be aware of how they and their interests are situated in relation to others. In addition, being aware of their own power and their disposition to exercise power make it possible for planners to take informed decisions about how they might best participate. In asymmetrical power relations where the interests of one stakeholder seem to be dominating the interests of others, planners should have the ability to either negotiate a more symmetrical relationship or employ counteracting tactics.

Cervero and Wilson place great confidence in “substantively democratic planning” as the defining feature of responsible practice (2006, p. 98). And yet, many of the cases they describe are arguably anything but substantively democratic. The aim to achieve substantively democratic planning is indeed noble and certainly consistent with core values found in a great deal of adult education literature. But achieving a reasonable degree of democratic participation by stakeholders requires capabilities that may be lacking in many planners, especially those trained in the technical-rational tradition where power and interests receive little or no attention. More research is needed to determine the degree to which planners can shift the influence tactics they employ to match the power relations they encounter. But even if there are limits to the range of tactics that may be employed, achieving a planning process that is adequately – rather than substantively – democratic may be good enough.

Being Ethically-Responsible

Cervero and Wilson (2001) regard all adult educators as social activists in practice (p. 12). In introducing a collection of chapters on power in practice, they assert that:

Asking the question, Who benefits? is an important tool for understanding the politics of adult education in any setting. However, out of the struggles that define the politics of practice comes an adult education program, practice or policy. By their actions, adult educators have answered the ethical question, Who should benefit? (pp. 12–13)

If all adult educators are social activists, then it makes a great deal of sense that the twin questions of “*who benefits?*” and “*who should benefit?*” must always be to the forefront because they frame the political and ethical problematic that might be confronted by planners if the answers to both questions are different. To Cervero and Wilson, the primary ethical challenge is to ensure that programs support those who should receive the benefits. But not all adult educators regard themselves as social activists and not all are in positions to negotiate such matters. Beyond this “macro” ethical question, there are many other ethical choices that must be made while planning programs.

The tools and techniques commonly used in planning programs can be applied responsibly but also in ways that violate ethical norms and natural justice. As novice

planners learn the craft, they must also learn the dangers of applying these tools as if they are “value free” – which they certainly are not – and their application has no ethical consequences. Given the challenges faced by humanity in the current age, we may need to push the boundaries of acceptable educational practice in the name of human survival, but we must do this in a deeply reflective, critical and responsible way.

CLOSING COMMENTS

In this chapter we have attempted to show how the role of power in program planning has evolved from early references in the 1960s to the more recent and influential work of Cervero and Wilson beginning in the 1990s. The work of UNESCO in *Rethinking Education* and of the UN and others in identifying the important role that education will play in addressing the *Sustainable Development Goals* set the stage for a radical rethinking about the possibilities of influencing the types of programs that are planned and who should benefit from them. They remind us that:

We are living in a world characterized by change, complexity and paradox. Economic growth and the creation of wealth have cut global poverty rates, yet vulnerability, inequality, exclusion and violence have escalated within and across societies throughout the world ... These changes signal the emergence of a new global context for learning that has vital implications for education. Rethinking the purpose of education and the organization of learning has never been more urgent. (UNESCO, 2015, p. 85)

The need to design and deliver a new generation of programs that address urgent global problems – while not ignoring more “local” concerns – has never been greater. We believe that technically-capable, politically-astute and ethically-responsible planners will play key roles in realizing these possibilities. Program planners must learn to *deal with power* and to *exercise their own power* in responsible ways in order to contribute to a greater “common good”.

NOTE

- ¹ A notion which was later challenged by Butterwick and Sork (2010) with the provocative notion and metaphor of the kitchen table in order to discuss feminist perspectives within program planning.

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