Asset Based Community Development

Alone we can do so little
together we can do so much

Helen Keller
Thank you for attending Power to the People: Building Citizen Driven Communities, 2019 Community Engagement Conference.

As this year’s Conference Conveners, we would like to take this opportunity to highlight the value and practical benefits of underpinning any exercise in community building with the philosophy and practice of ABCD.

Although this event has not been explicitly convened as an ABCD event, the stories, tools and learnings shared by the presenters and workshop facilitators all display strong elements of ABCD. Following is a brief summary to allow participants to better understand how ABCD relates to the practical stories, tools and examples shared throughout the Conference.

For further information, resources and reading, we recommend you visit the ABCDE Learning Sites website www.abcdelearningsites.com.au and sign up to the online toolkit which houses a comprehensive and practical collection of ABCD materials.

Yours sincerely,
Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) – What Is It All About?

Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) is a global philosophy and practice related to asset (strength) focused, place based and community driven initiatives. While practiced intuitively by many community builders for a long period, it was the work of John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann over a 40-year period and their creation of the ABCD Institute at Northwestern University, Chicago, USA in 1995 that gave it its name and prominence. Today, a wide diversity of impressive ABCD initiatives can be found across the world.

ABCD is not a recipe, but a place-based framework that incorporates such principles as:

- Meaningful and lasting community change always originates from within, and the wisdom of the community always exceeds the knowledge of the community.

- Building and nourishing relationships is the fundamental action in community building.

- Communities have never been built by dwelling on their deficiencies, needs and problems. Communities respond creatively when the focus is on resources, capacities, strengths, aspirations and opportunities.

- The critical developmental process involves highlighting, mapping, connecting and celebrating the diverse range of community assets, and harnessing these connected assets for action that creates and strengthens caring and inclusive communities.

- The strength of the community is directly proportional to the level of diversity its residents desire, and to the level of contribution of their abilities and assets to the well-being of their community. Every single person has capacities, abilities, gifts and ideas, and living a good life depends on whether those capacities can be used, abilities expressed, gifts given, and ideas shared.

- In every community, something works. Instead of asking “what’s wrong, and how to fix it,” ask “what’s worked and how do we get more of it?” It generates energy and creativity.

- Community residents must be valued as co-producers and citizens, rather than being viewed as clients, consumers and customers. They act responsibly when they care about and support what they create.

- Creating positive change begins simply with the act of conversation.

- Having fun must be a high priority in all community-building efforts.

- The central factor in sustainable change is local leadership and its continuous development and renewal.

- The starting point for change is always mindset and a positive attitude.

*By Peter Kenyon, Bank of I.D.E.A.S.*
The ABCD Approach and its Integration into Traditional Service Provider Roles

By Bank of I.D.E.A.S. and Communities@Work

‘Top down’ and ‘outside in’ approaches to community development, and the entrenchment of the welfare state, have created a social dependency on systems and institutions to solve problems with a magnified focus on community needs rather than community assets. Citizens have fewer opportunities to exercise their civic responsibilities and rights and have unwittingly become the clients of governments and institutions. This mentality and approach is becoming increasingly unsustainable as services and programs are stretched to meet demand. There are fewer resources to effectively address growing complex social issues; however, expectations and pressure continue to be placed on governments, community organisations and services to deliver solutions.

There is no denying the need for essential services and assistance. However, many of the services people depend upon in continuity, should only be delivering temporary measures to assist people through a difficult time or crisis. The ultimate goal of service delivery, should be to make people as independent in their own community as possible. The longer a person relies on a service, the harder it becomes for them to break away. The longer a person is disconnected from their community, the harder it becomes for them to re-engage.

Six Critical Questions

ABCD is a new lens and framework for encouraging greater community engagement and ownership. An ABCD approach urges service providers working within any community to be continuously asking the following six critical questions; namely –

1. What can residents do by themselves and for themselves without us?
2. What can residents do with a little help from us?
3. What do residents need done that they cannot do for themselves?
4. What can we stop doing to create space for resident action?
5. What can we offer to the community beyond services and programs to support resident action?
6. How can we make our services more asset focused and resident driven?
ABCD places the spotlight back on community assets and capacities rather than on community needs and deficiencies. As a philosophy and practice ABCD allows a community to focus on and use what it has to become stronger and get what it wants.

“ABCD operates under the premise that in any community, the most important assets are its people. Jody Kretzman (co-founder of the ABCD Institute), summarises it well – “Every single person has capacities, abilities, gifts and ideas, and living a good life depends on whether those capacities can be used, abilities expressed, gifts given and ideas shared.”

ABCD may seem idealistic, however, its values and principles steer actions towards social inclusion. People desire to have a purpose in life and to feel useful and connected to their communities. It is no secret that a person's relationships define them. ABCD supports social inclusion through highly relational processes. It encourages people to see themselves as someone who can make a difference in their community and in the lives of others. Relational processes also allow networks of trust and reciprocity to expand, grow and strengthen social capital.

A community that focuses strongly on building relationships and identifying assets is able to look internally to meet its needs. It relies on the passions, skills and interests of its residents to maximise on its assets and capacities and solve its own problems. A community where individuals feel connected and valued requires less individualised and costly services.

“Strong communities are created when citizens are the producers of their own future. They cannot be replaced. No professional, institution, business or government can substitute for the power, creativity or relevance of productive citizens.”

– Mike Green

In every community something works. Instead of asking ‘What’s wrong, and how to fix it’, ask, ‘What’s strong, what’s worked, and how do we get more of it?’ It generates hope, energy and creativity.

– Peter Kenyon
Providing a Framework

Communities will always require services; however, ABCD can help keep in check how dependent people become on those services, as well as changing the way services are delivered. This is the most powerful benefit of ABCD – by providing a framework that allows individuals to focus on community assets, it has the potential to transform a disconnected community, dependent on resource intensive external services, into a connected and empowered community that relies on itself and is in control of its own destiny. Ultimately, there is a major shift in community mindset. In this way, the practice and philosophy of ABCD has benefits for both communities and service providers.

The very nature of service delivery as it has evolved in the welfare state is needs based. Individuals are defined by their needs and deficiencies which most service providers address using top down approaches. This has resulted in ‘citizens’ with the power to exercise rights and responsibilities becoming ‘clients’ who look to services to meet their needs and demands.

Most service providers and institutions tend to do things ‘to’ and ‘for’ community. Participatory approaches tend to do things ‘with’ community. Ideally, service providers should look to supporting communities to do things ‘of’ and ‘by’ themselves as they discover and tap into community assets and capacities. This is exactly the type of result that ABCD can facilitate.

Incorporating the seemingly radical principles of ABCD into the entrenched needs based framework of service delivery can seem a daunting challenge. However, ABCD can be embedded into organisations and communities in small, incremental yet impactful ways. It is a highly relational process that focuses on continuous learning. This ultimately translates into a shared knowledge of community assets and resources that can be effectively connected and applied to areas of need to achieve something greater than the sum of the parts. Service provider staff have a unique role and advantage in gaining a knowledge and understanding of the communities they work in, and utilising this knowledge to empower citizens to strengthen their communities from the ‘inside out’.
Qualities of Effective Community Development

According to Mike Green, author of When People Care Enough to Act, effective community development has three qualities; namely – asset based, internally focused and relationship driven. The following table relates ABCD philosophy and practice to these three elements. It describes practical ways service providers can integrate ABCD into traditional roles, on any scale.

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<tr>
<th>The 3 Qualities of Effective Community Development</th>
<th>ABCD Philosophy and Practice</th>
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| Asset Based                                       | • Changing mindset – focus on the ‘glass half full’, rather than the ‘glass half empty’.  
• Strengths based approach.  
• Asset mapping – understanding what the community has and what works.  
• Gift obsessive – everyone has a contribution to make.  
• Appreciative inquiry – a cooperative search for the best in people, their organisations and their community. |
| Internally Focused                                | • Citizen driven.  
• ‘Inside out’ and ‘bottom-up’ as opposed to ‘top down’ and ‘outside in’ approaches.  
• The wisdom of the community always exceeds the knowledge of the experts.  
• Appreciative inquiry.  
• Community visioning.  
• Place based. |
| Relationship Driven                               | • Building and strengthening formal and informal social networks.  
• Building social capital.  
• Continuously having learning conversations.  
• Continuously creating community connections.  
• Asset mapping – ensuring a community drives and participates in the asset mapping process is a powerful way to build and strengthen relationships within a community.  
• Shareable.  
• Celebrating successes – fun-grounded. |
About the Conference
Conveners

Bank of I.D.E.A.S.

Bank of I.D.E.A.S. is an international community and economic development consultancy based in Western Australia. Since 1989, it has worked with over 2000 communities throughout Australia and in 59 countries overseas seeking to facilitate fresh and creative ways that stimulate community and local economic renewal.

Bank of I.D.E.A.S. staff are motivated by the desire to create caring, healthy, inclusive, sustainable and enterprising communities and local economies. Subsequently, it specialises in initiatives to strengthen community building, local economic development and youth empowerment.

Communities@Work

Communities@Work is Canberra's largest for-purpose not-for-profit community organisation. Communities@Work has a strong commitment to building resilient, sustainable and socially inclusive communities. It is responsive to the needs of the community and delivers complementary services that support positive educational outcomes, assist in alleviating hardship, enhance quality of life and lead to positive social change.
10 Great TED Talks on Community Building

Compiled by Bank of I.D.E.A.S.

Angela Blanchard  ‘Building on the Strengths of Communities’
Ron Finley         ‘A Guerrilla Gardener in South Central LA’
Shani Graham       ‘Take a Street and Build a Community’
DeAmon Harges      ‘ABCD and Making the Invisible Visible’
Celeste Headlee    ‘10 Ways to Have a Better Conversation’
Ken Robinson       ‘Do Schools kill Creativity?’
Cormac Russell     ‘Sustainable Community Development - from what’s wrong to what’s strong’
Ernesto Sirolli    ‘Want to Help Someone? Shut Up and Listen’
Robert Waldinger   ‘What makes a good life? Lessons from the longest study on happiness.’
Pam Warhurst       ‘How We Can eat Our Landscapes’

In addition, the following two YouTube videos are worth watching:

Ken Diehm          ‘Participatory Budgeting’
Sacred Suds        ‘Getting to Know the Neighbours’
In the Canberra suburb of Scullin, residents had a problem. Most Scullin residents love their little suburb, but they didn’t feel the same about their local shops.

While a handful of businesses still do a brisk trade, there are empty shopfronts, a closed supermarket better known for exporting baby formula and Ugg boots than providing milk and bread, and a vibe saying, “Nothing to see here”.

When, in October 2018, Rachel Howard and her neighbour Sue White kickstarted a project to change their local shops and help residents in their Belconnen suburb become better connected, they didn’t realise what would happen next.

Six months later the group has 400 members, over 50 active volunteers a week, runs social soccer, street libraries, games nights and leads a volunteer-run shop (The Scullin Traders) that turned over $26,000 in its first two months of operation.

The Scullin Traders is just part of the SCG’s story, but it’s a key part. The community entrepreneurship hub is run by the Scullin Community Group as a key part of their efforts to transform the vibe of the struggling Scullin shops. The pop up space in the front half of a wholesale bakery features comfy couches for coffee drinkers, handmade products from Canberra microbusinesses, sells milk, bread and local farm-grown produce, and runs evening public workshops with local creatives teaching everything from macrame to eco rug making.

The Scullin Traders was fit out by the volunteers in under a month for under $3000. In it’s opening month it turned over $18,000, and now four months later, it’s constantly evolving.

“One of the things we’ve been surprised about is how simply offering a platform for people to meet, connect and create positive change leads to so many other positives. Our community is really proud of this space: they’ve taken pride it making and keeping it looking good, and constantly come up with ideas to make it even better,” says Sue.

The group has also transformed the public courtyard of the shops’ space. A volunteer built and installed a community noticeboard, an artist was engaged via a grant from the ACT Graffiti Management Program to create two murals on large walls in the courtyard space, and a coffee trailer operates in the courtyard seven mornings a week, transforming the space into a meeting hub that is almost unrecognisable to four months ago. Coming up next are raised garden beds, which the community group will build and look after, using funds they’ve raised from the Scullin Traders.
“Dozens of community members work together to make this happen. We have about 20 people each week who each take on a 3 or 4 hour volunteer shopkeeper shift, plus about a dozen people or more behind the scenes doing everything from bookkeeping and accounts through to sourcing and filtering new stockists. Every single person is a volunteer. One person keeps an eye on the egg and bread orders, another promotes us on social, and a leadership team of three people meet each week to keep things on track,” says Scullin Community Group president Sue White.

“There’s absolutely no way this would work with just a couple of people. The whole community is driving it and supporting it,” she says.

Sue believes one of the keys to the Scullin Community Group’s success so far is its ability to build and nurture relationships across the community.

“Before Rachel and I set up the group, we engaged for three months with every single group or individual we could find who had run projects in our suburb, or who had an interest in it. We talked to the school P&c, to people who’d run events here a few years ago, met with Belconnen Community Services and school leadership, and listened intently. Through that we realised we needed one group focussed on community building and changing the shops and another – Scullin Neighbourhood Watch – to deal with safety-related issues. There is crossover of course, and both work together but it allows us to keep really focussed on what each wants to do, and to find volunteers passionate about different issues,” she says.

The other strength of the group is leading with positivity.

“Rachel and I have been very clear from the beginning that this is a project about solutions. We always focus on creative solutions rather than negativity, and while our very active Facebook community needs almost no moderation, we step in if we think things are getting negative. We also aim to empower people to take action themselves: if someone suggests a games night, we say “Brilliant: want to run it?” – and they do,” she says.

The result is that Scullin residents are taking ownership and helping eco-produce the direction of the project in the shop and beyond.

“In the Scullin Traders, many of our new ideas come from shop volunteers or customers. We now sell KeepCups, have a wheelbarrow for donated ‘free’swap’ produce from people’s gardens, sell newspapers, and support local charities by becoming a drop off point for things like food collections. It’s evolving all the time,” says Sue.

_The Scullin Traders was seed funded via a $5000 donation from the ACT Chief Minister’s fund._

_Website: [www.myscullin.com](http://www.myscullin.com) Facebook.com /scullintraders /scullincommunitygroup_
For further information, please contact us

**Communities@Work**

245 Cowlishaw Street  
Greenway ACT 2900

(02) 6293 6500  
admin@commsatwork.org

[commsatwork.org]

14 Bird Road  
Kalamunda WA 6076

+618 6293 1848  
Peter Kenyon  
M: 0417 183 719  
pk@bankofideas.com.au

Maria D’Souza  
M: 0404 957 780  
md@bankofideas.com.au

[bankofideas.com.au]