Growing a Network of ABCDE Learning Sites across Australia

The history…

During August 2015, the Bank of I.D.E.A.S. (BOI) and the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) organised a nationwide tour by Cormac Russell from Nurture Development (ND), based in the United Kingdom (UK). The focus of the tour was to contribute to the strengthening of the philosophy and practice of Asset Based Community Driven Efforts (ABCDE) in Australia (also known as ABCD – Asset Based Community Development). A wide range of practitioners involved in community building initiatives, supported by local councils, NGOs, community banks, faith communities and community based organisations benefited from the wisdom and experiences of Nurture Development, and many became energised and excited by the approach of *'ABCDE Learning Sites'* that were instigated across the UK. Subsequently, many groups enquired about the possibility of a similar networking framework in Australia, while stressing the need to be respectful of local cultures, contexts and histories. Appendix 1 is a statement by Cormac Russell that outlines why there is a need for a strong and focused emphasis on place-based community building efforts.

In summary, Nurture Development supported the establishment and development of the original 12 Learning Sites across the UK, with the expressed intent of creating at the neighbourhood level, exemplary projects that promote rural and urban asset based community building practice and revitalisation efforts. The ABCDE Learning Sites experience in the UK produced some interesting outcomes influenced by the cultural and social context of that geographical region and management and implementation logistics. BOI has taken into consideration the outcomes of the ND UK experience and has attempted to adapt the model to best suit the Australian context. Currently, the ABCDE Learning Sites model in the UK no longer operates.

Since 2015, the Australian ABCDE Learning Sites model has evolved in its own right. The pilot project involved 14 local communities supported by 11 local governments and community based groups across Australia, namely –
- City of Launceston (Tasmania);
- City of Whittlesea (Victoria)
- Wyndham City (Victoria);
- Sunbury Community Health (Victoria);
- Bass Coast Shire Council (Victoria);
- Yarra Ranges Council (Victoria);
- City of Onkaparinga (South Australia);
- City of Charles Sturt (South Australia);
- Shire of Murray (Western Australia); and
- City of Kalamunda (Western Australia).

The commitment and contribution of these communities to support the Learning Sites pilot project and the further development of ABCD in Australia needs to be acknowledged. Through their involvement, a suite of practical resources was developed and many lessons learned as to how the ABCDE Learning Sites movement could potentially expand across Australia.

Specific changes made to the ABCDE Learning Sites model based on the experience of the communities that participated in the pilot program include –

- a restructure of pricing and packages to allow greater flexibility and accessibility to suit varying budgets and administrative / managerial realities and complexities;
- the Learning Sites framework has been simplified to reflect the experience of the Learning Sites involved in the pilot project in terms of what worked and what did not; and
- planned actions to open up the network to anyone with a passion for ABCDE across Australia (rather than ABCDE Learning Sites members only) to help facilitate, encourage and open up the peer-to-peer learning process.

BOI invites any community interested in both deepening and accelerating local community building efforts to consider the ABCDE Learning Sites model as practical framework through which to apply the ABCD methodology. ABCDE Learning Sites is a flexible framework that can assist any community to draw on the value of social capital and the power of local, 'bottom up', 'inside out' and asset based approaches to build a healthy, connected and resilient community.

The approach...

The core strength of the ABCDE Learning Site approach is that it enables people to change practice by practicing the change. In essence, the approach operates to six principles:

1. Every context is different, the challenge being to learn what works best for each unique location. While the Asset Based Community Development approach, known as ABCD, is an internationally respected and tested model that operates to a set of principles and emerging practices, it is not a defined '*cookie cutter*' model – it is place based, adaptive, responsive and innovative in a way that closed models cannot be.
2. The wisdom of local people always exceeds the knowledge of the experts.
3. Relationship building is viewed as the fundamental activity of community building.
4. The starting point for community building is '*what's strong, not wrong'*, thus the focus on assets, capacities, abilities and possibilities, rather than needs, deficiencies, disabilities and problems.
5. The challenge is for community members to move from being treated as customers, consumers, clients and patients in others' programs and services, to co-owners, co-producers and citizens in the design and implementation of actions that build their communities as healthy, caring and inclusive places and groups.
6. Peer to peer learning and sharing across the Network is actively promoted and viewed as the critical learning approach.

A typical Learning Site may initially begin as one community defined geographically or by interest (for example, a suburb or a multicultural group within a community). The aim is to grow the Learning Site over time into a cluster that includes other communities in the vicinity to share the knowledge and experience gained from using ABCDE as a model to build and strengthen community.

Each site/community should ideally form a local *Community Builder Team* (5-12 members), often created as a sub group from an existing group like a Residents Association or identified through a facilitated local workshop.

A *Community Connector* is recruited to work part time with the Community Builder Team to provide some additional operational *"arms and legs".* In the UK, three approaches emerged:

1) The Community Connector is funded by a grant from local government, community bank, philanthropic group or local community.
2) An existing natural community builder is located from within the community who has their salary topped up e.g. a local pastor who receives an additional £4K on-top of their annual stipend from the Church in return for taking on more of an active role as a Community Connector.
3) Someone who is a natural community connector, but who is currently employed to do something else like a district nurse, and is released by their organisation for a set period to work as a Community Connector.

Through the Australian Learning Sites pilot program experience, a fourth option for recruiting a community connector was identified:

4) A community member who volunteers a significant amount of their time to building and strengthening community, who is a natural community connector is recruited as a part time employee to support the project.

In the event that a Community Builder Team is proving difficult to bring together, the Community Connector may be identified by the organisation supporting the Learning Site to work with a number of groups within the community. In this instance, it is imperative that the asset mapping elements of ABCD are given special attention. In particular, the relational aspect that allows groups and individuals to discover new assets and make new connections within the community. This approach will lay the groundwork for forming a Community Builder Team or, similar mechanisms of cross collaboration and involvement.

The stages…

Once the Community Builder Team has been established and/or a Community Connector appointed, the ABCDE Learning Site will typically enter into two stages, namely –

Stage One:

The Community Builder Team, with the support of the Community Connector begin intentionally to map, connect, mobilise and celebrate the assets of their community through conversation and social interaction activities. They engage with local associations and groups and work towards mobilising more community led activity and also towards the development of a network of associations. This Stage of the process is highly relational. The connections made and relationships created and strengthened in this stage of the ABCDE process will have long-term benefits in terms of building a strong and healthy local community.

They key aspect to keep in mind in Stage One of the ABCDE Learning Sites process is to ensure that community led activity does not focus on the desires or dreams of individuals within the community. Certainly, connections made can and will support individuals, however, the process should always focus on implementing projects, activities and initiatives that are supported by a number of groups and individuals and, in doing so draws on a range of resources and assets from across the community. Essentially, if three or more individuals are not willing to drive a project, activity or initiative and, the broader community does not support them then; this is not considered community-led and should not be continued as an ABCDE Learning Sites activity. Stage One is simply about involving the community to discover and connect to local assets, strengthen relationships and, drive community-led action that will support that process.

Stage Two:

The ABCDE Learning Sites model can be a useful strengths based approach for a community to formulate a community vision or community plan. A community vision or plan which, as well as spelling out what the community wants to see happen over the next ten years, breaks those ambitions down into what the community can do themselves, what they can do with some help and, what they need outside agencies to deliver. Stage Two requires a far greater commitment of resources especially in terms of time, management and administrative support. Stage Two is best executed through local government and / or an incorporated organisation such as a residents or ratepayers association.

The majority of communities involved in the Australian pilot of ABCDE Learning Sites successfully operated under a 'Stage One' type arrangement. Only one ABCDE Learning Site in the pilot program operated under a both a Stage One and a Stage Two arrangement and this was carried out successfully and continues to progress and benefit the community. For more details on the successes and lessons learned from the ABCDE Learning Sites pilot program, please contact BOI staff.

Bank of I.D.E.A.S. has the capacity to provide a mentoring, training and network coordination role in relation to both Stages of the ABCDE Learning Sites model.

The benefits...

As a partnership, Bank of I.D.E.A.S, will work with each community to put their real-time know-how and experience at the disposal of interested local governments, community banks, NGOs, community organisations and faith communities with a view to grow a set of ABCDE Learning Sites across Australia. Each Learning Sites member will be offered mentoring and training support to ensure that the process implemented is tailored specifically for each community and, what that community hopes to achieve through the process. The ABCDE Learning Sites approach draws on the experience and knowledge of BOI staff, ABCDE guides and on the invaluable experience of ABCD initiatives both within Australia and internationally.

Learning Sites members can choose from a range of support options that could include any of the following:

a. A Toolkit of practical tools, support materials and resources related to asset-mapping, hosting learning conversations, finding Community Connectors, starting relational conversations, running ABCDE facilitation, developing local leadership, using local media etc. The toolkit will be constantly updated; as new practices emerge from the each of the Learning Sites, and as new tools and information are discovered and shared. Learning Sites will operate to an open source ethos, which each Learning Site expected to contribute to and benefit from the common wealth of knowledge and resources that accrue. The toolkit will also feature resources from ABCD projects, activities and initiatives from across the globe.
b. The provision of experienced ABCDE Guides.
c. On-line support through video conferencing. Learning Sites will be asked to participate in facilitated video conferencing sessions with a view to sharing their learning on a chosen topic for each session.
d. Participation in ABCD focused gatherings open to Learning Sites and any individuals or organisations with an interest and passion for ABCD.
e. The provision of a participatory Learning/Evaluation framework, which will include training and support, so that each Learning Site can use the framework to capture their emerging story.
f. The Provision of *'Story Harvesting'* training with a view to support the gathering and sharing of their emerging stories.
g. Access to on-line and real-time face to face facilitated Peer-to-Peer Learning Site sharing sessions.

h. Support in establishing a Community of Practice.
i. One to one support for innovators within organisations who wish to explore how they can use their institutional assets to build community and create community alternative to standardised services.
j. Support in discovering and supporting Community Builders and recruitment and the training of Community Connectors.
k. Support for communities in formulating community visions through community planning sessions that lead to total-place transformation.

The requirements:

While each Learning Cluster will be unique in nature, each will require the support of a host/ anchor organisation(s) like a local council, community bank, NGO, faith community or community-based organisation that will need to fulfill the following –

a) Enlist at least one interested community – neighbourhoods or small towns (pop: 100 - 5,000 per community). Interest can be established on the basis of having between 5 to 12 Community Builders who are prepared to contribute their time to initiate a community conversation with their neighbours about the skills, gifts and talents of their community, and / or with the support of a part time Community Connector. This ensures that the process is community led and the community holds what is learned.

b) The Community Connector must be accepted, and ideally chosen by the community. Community Connectors are found in at least three distinct ways: a) Create a dedicated funding stream and work with the Community Builder Team to recruit a salaried person to the new post.   b) Recruit someone who is already undertaking community connector type roles and top-up their salary. c) Invite a person already working effectively in the community, with the support of their organisation to assume this role, but to continue to be paid by their organisation. This might be thought of as a secondment arrangement.

c) An active willingness to support the establishment of a ABCDE Learning Site and participate in a community of practice which will be dedicated to learning how best to advance and deepen community building practice.

d) A willingness to accept mentoring and training, and to share all experiences with other Learning Sites and the wider national and international ABCD learning community.

e) A willingness to actively participate in and contribute to a peer-to-peer network across Australia, and globally.

f) A willingness share any resources or tools developed through the Learning Sites process for inclusion in the Toolkit.

The cost…

Recognising that Australian communities are at different stages in terms of their ABCD community building experiences, and have varying financial capacities and contexts, a range of participation options are available.

To become an ABCDE Learning Site member, the cost is $1,500.00 per year (plus GST). This includes –
- Access to the ABCDE Learning Sites online Toolkit (includes regular emails notifying members of resource updates and additions);
- Discounted or free access to training sessions for up to four members per learning site at workshops, conferences and training events held by the Bank of I.D.E.A.S. across Australia each year;

- Access to Peer-to-Peer learning sessions will be primarily facilitated through video conference sessions, and also through planned events (e.g. breakfast sessions or sundowners) that bring together practitioners, organisational staff and community members to share and converse about ABCDE in an informal setting; and
- Phone and video conferencing support from Bank of I.D.E.A.S. staff to help guide the process of establishing an ABCDE Learning Site within the chosen community. This allows practitioners an avenue to 'bounce ideas' off trained practitioners and seek practical advice.

If the process requires further outside expertise, the Bank of I.D.E.A.S. recommends and provides a range of ABCDE Guides that can help facilitate the process. ABCDE Guides have a range of skill sets (see https://www.abcdelearningsites.com.au/guides/). An ABCDE Guide can be provided by the Bank of I.D.E.A.S. based on a day rate. Day rates vary for each Guide. Travel and accommodation costs are may be additional depending on the physical location of Learning Sites.

Any pricing options excludes the cost of employing or seconding part time Community Connectors. For more information on the benefits of becoming and ABCDE Learning Site for communities, please see *'ABCDE Learning Sites: What is in it for us as a Community?'*

For more information…

For further information, or to register interest, please contact Peter Kenyon (Bank of I.D.E.A.S.) at pk@bankofideas.com.au or 0417183719 or Maria D'Souza on 0404 957 780 or md@bankofideas.com.au

Appendix 1: Why Place Such a Strong and Focused Emphasis on Place-based Community Building?

The root causes of the vast majority of socio-economic and political issues are: disconnection and inequality. Research shows the best way to address this disconnect is as close to people's doorsteps as possible, since people will engage and connect around the things they care about, and most people will mobilise around the things that are close to home.

Despite this fact, most approaches advanced by many Governmental and Non-Governmental agencies alike, fail to be place-based and do not directly address disconnection, which is to say they do not go to the root of these problems. Preferring instead the futile and non-sustainable approaches that seek to address only the symptoms. Addiction, youth issues, the challenges synonymous with ageing populations, poor health outcomes and health inequality, public safety issues, ecological and environmental threats, and economic crisis all require a more concerted approach that builds on indigenous capacities to co-create a better future at local level. In other words, a community building process is required. That community-building process must come from inside out of the communities, where people live, sleep and work. Currently the solutions that dominate are top-down, and outside in.

We call this alterative grassroots approach: Community Building instead of Community Development to emphasis that our approach seeks primarily to work with what is within the community already before focusing on external resources. By changing the sequences, from focusing on leveraging external resources first, to a focus on internal resources as a starting point, when outside support is leveraged it will come as a sustainable match and will help build an enduring legacy.

Over the last twenty years (at least), instead of supporting the building of communities at neighbourhood level, many helping organizations have unintentionally done the opposite. Instead of supporting citizens to organize and come together as the primary inventors in their local communities and in democracy more generally, professionals have endeavoured to become the inventors themselves. Though well intentioned, through programmes, services and interventions many Public Sector and Third Sector organisations have treated the people they serve as passive recipients, instead of as citizens.

Hence today, the most pressing challenge now facing Local Government is not to turn active citizens into satisfied clients; it is in fact the opposite: to support people to journey from being clients to being citizens, the primary producers of future. While this is a perennial task, the urgency of rebooting Local Government and it partners to this task could not be greater. It would also appear that the interest in developing this way of working is high.

Now more than ever we need to reboot Local Government and helping agencies so that they can re-orientate themselves towards their primary function: to support citizenship and community building. Placing the provision of services and programmes in an important but non-dominant position to community building is critical to the future of local democracy. The current assumption that services and programmes will be sufficient in addressing our most pressing challenges is ubiquitous at almost every level of society. The issue is not just that these technocratic programmes are not always fit for purpose; it is more fundamental than that.

The assumption that the provision of better services is commensurate with increased individual and population wellbeing is misguided and runs contrary to great preponderance of scientific evidence.

Epidemiology (the scientific study of what determines human wellbeing) for example is clear that the primary determinants of our wellbeing are:

1. Personal agency
2. Associational life
3. Economic status
4. Environmental conditions

In short our community assets primarily determine the extent to which we are well and how quickly we recover when unwell. Of course institutions have a role to play in supporting our wellbeing but it is not a primary one. Institutions are not the primary producers of our health, wellbeing, wisdom, prosperity, justice or democracy, communities are.

Over the last two decades however, in the areas of health and wellbeing, education, local economics, environment, justice and public safety the primary role of community assets has been relegated to second place, with services and programmes in the ascendency as the dominant drivers. Institutions have taken the place of citizens as the primary inventors of the solutions to social and political problems. Accordingly, health, which is primarily a social and political matter, has come to be thought of as a medical one, and technocratic solutions have come to be considered more desirable and trustworthy than the tacit knowledge of citizens and communities.

Indeed across a wide range of issues, from gang crime to dementia, the dominant assumption is that where a social problem exists, generating a solution is the primary responsibility of one institution or other (and more recently of a cluster of institutions working in concert). Yet the evidence clearly shows that this sequence is not only out of whack with what science tells us it is also counterproductive, in that instead of empowering citizens and communities, it is increasing dependency on institutions (instutionalisation) and decreasing interdependency in community life. Ultimately, it defines democracy as Government centric, instead of citizen centered.

A movement of citizens and civic-minded public servants in the United Kingdom and Australia is gathering pace and they are growing in their resolve to face this challenge. In Australia, inspired by an approach that Nurture Development has stewarded across the UK, a number of Local Governments, Community Banks and Third Sector organisations are eager to advance a process that restores a balance between services and community building. The innovation of this approach is that instead of attempting to reform institutional systems, services and programmes, it emphasises the need to expand civic space and authority in community to grow interdependency and collective agency. Stronger communities in turn hold their agencies, leaders and governments to account, and form meaningful partnerships to co-produce change. But they also take ownership of the civic work that communities do best.

Civic practitioners in turn aim to support citizen led invention. That process requires intentional community building, since the assets of many communities lie hidden in plain view. Helping communities make the invisible visible is therefore the first step. We believe this can be achieved by supporting interested neighbourhoods to employ a community builder; their primary role is to serve the community. Put simply they will not have any pre-engagement agendas as defined by outside agencies, such as health, youth, ageing well etc., their brief is just to connect, across parts of the neighbourhood. This is a radical form of inclusion that seeks to grow interdependence in community life and reduce institutionalization among those who have become most marginalized.

Cormac Russell, CEO, Nurture Development