

Doing Things Differently: Using the ABCD Method to Negotiate with Local Leaders in Community Engagement Projects*

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Introduction

The Laedza Batanani Project has been regarded as the pioneering experiment that paved the way for other prominent African Theatre for Development (TFD) projects such as Kamiriithu in Kenya, Murewa in Zimbabwe, Kumba in Cameroon and Marotholi Travelling Theatre in Lesotho. Laedza Batanani (1974–6) aimed at awakening the creative potential of villagers in the Bokalaka region of Botswana. The major task was to ‘overcome problems of low community participation and indifference to government development efforts in the area (Kidd and Byram, 1982). As the Setswana term for the project implies, *laedza batanani* sought to raise the community's consciousness by enabling villagers to participate in their own development and replace apathy with collective action.

However, in spite of its best intentions, Kidd and Byram (1982) report that nothing happened at the end of the Laedza Batanani experiment. Why? They attribute the failure to the dual nature of TFD projects, their intention to create critical awareness among participants on the one hand, and to disseminate dominant ideologies that tend to domesticate participants on the other. Laedza Batanani ended up having community leaders, government officials and development workers imposing their ideas on the local villagers by dealing with issues and concerns of the dominant class rather than giving voice to the marginalised. For this reason, Kidd and Byram (1982) have lamented how Laedza Batanani laid the foundation for most TFD projects that have tended to reduce

community participation to an instrumental exercise, critical awareness to false consciousness, problem posing to symptomatic problem solving, and collective action to external imposition. The situation then, which still prevails now, is that most TFD projects in Africa are once-off events with limited or no follow-up in terms of building capacity and organising the community for action (Chinyowa, 2005).

This paper seeks to demonstrate how best to negotiate with community leaders or gatekeepers without overshadowing the primary beneficiaries of TFD projects. Drawing illustrations from a baseline survey workshop held with community leaders in the Eastern Cape Province, the paper shows how the Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) method could be perhaps the most effective strategy for initiating sustainable community driven TFD projects. The ABCD strategy rests on the premise that local communities can drive their own development by identifying and mobilizing their own existing, and often unrecognized assets.

From top-down to bottom-up approach

The shift from an exogenous, ‘top-down’ or ‘outside-in’ approach towards an endogenous, ‘bottom-up’ or ‘inside out’ approach in contemporary development discourse has necessitated the search for more people-centred intervention paradigms. The ‘endogenisation’ of development discourse recognises that processes of conscientisation, empowerment and transformation are internal to the

mechanisms of social structures and cannot be entirely dependent on external interventions.

In the case of Theatre for Development, two major intervention approaches can be identified. The first approach is based on an 'outside-in' or 'top-down' interventionist model that has been widely criticised for imposing development initiatives that are 'foreign' to target communities (Epskamp, 1989). In this exogenous approach, the decisions made from outside the community have been found to be largely ineffective in changing established attitudes, beliefs and practices. The target community feels as if the externally driven development initiative is being imposed upon them. Thus as a development strategy, the 'top-down' model tends to underestimate the target community's ability to shape their own destiny. On the contrary, the community lacks the necessary commitment since they often remain passive, uninterested and unmotivated. As a result, the exogenous approach has been widely discredited as a form of manipulative propaganda that lacks reciprocity, dialogue and feedback (Prentki, 2003).

Perhaps the main shortcoming of the top-down development model lies in its 'needs-based' approach. As Sarah Keeble (2006) explains, needs-based approaches start with outsiders evaluating what is deficient in a community and how to fix the problems. Instead of working with the community to bring about change, external agents tend to set the agenda in order to 'bail out' what they regard as 'distressed communities' (Keeble, 2006). Thus outsiders take up the responsibility of making judgements on the needs of communities which they may not be fully aware of. Even though the needs based approach remains popular, it is apparent that communities are made to feel as if they are lacking, dependent and problematic. Such an externally driven focus can be detrimental to development because it leads to deficient-oriented interventions where the community in question continues to rely upon outsiders.

Theatre for development practitioners are now advocating for an 'inside-out' or 'bottom-up' approach that allows more room for active community participation in development communication. This endogenous model focuses on internal social structures rather than

external agents. In so far as it constitutes an internal process of dialogue, action, reflection and change, the endogenous model has come to be characterised by a strong tendency to make use of the local community's own resources, and therefore commands a considerable degree of credibility, participation and sustainability. The shift from viewing the community in terms of its needs to viewing it in terms of its resources places the asset based approach at an advantage.

The Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) approach

Although contemporary TFD interventions are still dominated by the 'top-down' or 'outside-in' approach, the gradual shift from a needs-based to an asset-based paradigm could, to a considerable extent, be credited to the ABCD method. According to Sarah Keeble (2006), asset based community development begins with what is present in the community and builds on the assets and capacities of individuals, associations and institutions. Rather than focus on what is lacking or deficient in the community, John Kretzmann and John McKnight (1993) have proposed a drastically different approach that involves the total investment of the community in their own development.

How can the community shift from a needs based to an asset based paradigm? Kathy Jourdain (2005) argues that the process begins with the individual who needs to view his/her community as a place of opportunity and not a place of problems. Jourdain (2005) poses four questions that communities need to ask themselves about what they observe in their locality as follows:

- (i) What opportunities are available?
- (ii) How can we turn these opportunities into advantages?
- (iii) What do we want to have in our community?
- (iv) What is working in our community?

These questions are meant to prompt community members to identify and develop their own asset mapping strategy before they can turn to external agents. Kretzmann and

McKnight (1993) have argued that asset mapping enables communities to see the wealth of resources in their community and sets them on the path to utilizing their assets in order to create change. External assistance can then be provided when communities are actively engaged in developing their own assets.

However, the ABCD method has been criticized for failing to address the role of external agents, discouraging inter-dependency among community members, dealing with unequal relations of power and fostering community leadership in different contexts. Since ABCD focuses on the building of social capital, this can only happen when all members are recognized and valued according to their disparate abilities, and when the community works together for the common good. Thus adopting a one size fits all strategy does not seem to work in favour of the ABCD method. But, in spite of these shortcomings, ABCD still has an edge over the needs based approach to community development. When it comes to community leaders in particular, the deficiency model tends to discourage them from taking the initiative to tap on local resources by highlighting the negative aspects of the community.

Mpingana Senior Secondary School case study

The trip to the Eastern Cape for a Theatre for Development (TFD) project was undertaken from 26 - 28 July, 2014. The target of the community engagement project was Mpingana Senior Secondary School located in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. This trip was a follow-up to previous trips that Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) had carried out in 2013, with a joint partnership that included the community, the Faculty of Arts and the Faculty of Humanities. This partnership has since been broadened and includes an independent production company called ShakeXperience which makes use of the creative arts to facilitate teaching and learning in varied contexts. The TUT team consisted of Mzo Sirayi, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Kennedy Chinyowa from the Department of Drama and Film Studies. ShakeXperience was represented by Selloane Mokuku, a

programmes developer and researcher in the company's Arts in Education business unit.

On arrival at Mpingana Senior Secondary School, the team was introduced to the school teachers and community leaders who were members of the School Governing Body (SGB). The SGB is regarded by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) as an important structure that contributes to the administration of the school by making decisions that affect the running of the school. After the preliminary introductions, Sirayi acknowledged the presence of community leaders whom he described as 'village professors'. He proceeded to point out that the 'village professors' serve as an invaluable resource that will inform TUT's engagement with the community. Having been born and bred in the Mpingana area, Sirayi remarked that he was not impressed by people from the community who go to study but do not return to add value to the community. From these remarks, it was clear that he was one of the Gramscian 'organic intellectuals' who had been nurtured in the local village and had come to 'plough back' into the community.

In Sirayi's view, TUT's collaboration with ShakeXperience and engagement with Mpingana Senior Secondary School and the local community was aimed at exploring capacity building strategies for the development of the school. The teachers and community leaders were therefore encouraged to take advantage of the opportunity to improve the school's persistently low matriculation pass rate. Sirayi went on to challenge the gatekeepers saying, 'We cannot afford to settle for better, when there's best.' The idea was to share the 'dream' of making a difference in the community by improving the school's 'matric' pass rate which stood at only 6% in 2012. In his response, the school principal acknowledged that the school was underperforming but was quick to add that, 'That does not mean we cannot perform. The school must perform with the little it has, we need to have a bigger vision and move forward'. At the time of this visit, the school had set itself a target of 50% 'matric' pass rate for 2014. The principal indicated that they were ready to listen, work together and do what was needed in order to improve.

Community leaders such as the SGB and teachers make up the gatekeepers of the community who often want to attract resources

from outside the community by playing up the severity of its problems (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993). Such leaders believe that their success lies in the amount of resources they will have brought into the community rather than on how self-reliant the community has become. As a result, the community itself begins to believe in its own deficiency. People begin to see themselves as incapable of taking charge of their lives. They are conditioned to 'not to know', and regarded as people who 'beg to know'. In most situations, they are viewed as 'empty vessels' (Freire, 1967) who need to be 'trained' in the art of articulating and solving their problems. Alison Mathie and Gord Cunningham argue that such community members, "no longer act like citizens, instead they begin to act like clients or consumers of services with no incentive to be producers" (2002:4). In their book aptly entitled, *Building Communities from the Inside Out*, Kretzmann and McKnight argue that the process of recognising the people's capacity to solve their own problems begins with the construction of a new lens through which communities can begin, "to assemble their strengths into new combinations, new structures of opportunity, new resources of income and control, and new possibilities for production" (1993:6). In the case of the Mpingana community, it was necessary to begin by changing the mind-sets of the leaders themselves, to make them 'lead by stepping back' through realising their own and the community's capacity to shift from being 'clients' to 'citizens'.

Facilitating the baseline survey workshop

The school principal's use of words such as 'the school must perform with the little it has' set an interesting entry toward introducing a different perspective of looking at the school situation. The perspective was to use an Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) approach. Accordingly, the presence of the SGB and teachers in the workshop was recognised as an invaluable opportunity to establish a shared vision toward improving the school. Although the school's 'problems' were not ignored, the team introduced action laden games and exercises followed by reflections to come up with a baseline survey whose purpose was to:

- (i) establish the situation in the community in order to plan the parameters of the community engagement project
- (ii) negotiate with the gatekeepers in order to obtain their permission and buy-in before working with the school community
- (iii) establish baseline indicators against which the project's outcomes will be 'measured'
- (iv) collect data that will assist in designing, planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating the project
- (vi) establish the priorities of the school community which will inform subsequent interventions
- (vii) map out the envisaged activities that will be carried out during the project.

The baseline survey workshop was led by co-facilitators from TUT and ShakeXperience. The workshop process began with playful games and exercises aimed at building trust and creating team spirit. According to Stig Eriksson (2009), play acts as a distancing device for making the familiar strange by allowing participants to 'step back' and look more critically at events and situations. Even though the distancing might create the impression that the events are rather detached from the real, its power lies in the capacity to arrest attention while creating space for involvement, absorption, empathy and detachment. Eriksson (2009) further argues that 'distancing effects' in play such as enjoyment and freedom help to mediate the seemingly disparate worlds of fiction and reality. As Soyini Madison (2010:2) has argued, by applying performance based strategies, we enter a poetics of understanding and an embodied system of knowledge concerning how activism can be constituted through imagination, fantasy and creativity. The playfulness deployed through warm-up games and exercises therefore acts as the means for subverting and reconstituting reality.

For instance, during the baseline survey workshop, teachers and community leaders were made to participate in warm-up games and exercises. The first warm-up game involved participants finding partners and counting up to 3 in turns. As the counting continued, the numbers were replaced with gestures and other bodily movements. Participants were then made to reflect on the significance of the

counting game. Through this game, participants were able to appreciate each other’s learning capacities, to realise areas that they are strong at and those that they were not. As one SGB member pointed out, ‘When this exercise was introduced, it looked so easy, but when you actually do it, it is a different story’. The reflective session opened an opportunity for more discussion and enabled participants to realise how parents and teachers needed to work together in order to make a difference to the school. Thus through warm-up games, the mood of ‘playfulness’ (Sutton-Smith,1997:148) was able to arouse feelings of laughter, mirth and relaxation while simultaneously subverting familiar norms, values and beliefs. The intense absorption evoked by the ‘playful’ experience had the power to move participants to other states of being. In the process of being distanced from familiarity, participants were transported into

an alternative world that offered them a sense of being liberated from the limitations and constraints of ordinary reality. Play created space for them to experiment and generate new symbolic worlds that could eventually be translated into reality.

It was perhaps the ‘give and gain’ exercise that brought the teachers and community leaders closer to the ABCD approach. The primary purpose of this exercise was to enable participants to express their workshop expectations and to commit themselves to the workshop process. Each participant voiced what he/she expected to contribute and what he/she would get from developing the school. The table below shows a summary of participants’ contributions during the give and gain exercise:

Table 1: Outcome of the Give and Gain Exercise

GIVE	GAIN
Participate in an engaging way	How to make change concrete
Learn by doing the activity	How teachers can make teaching to be fun
Giving information and learners give back	How to make teaching right
Allowing extra time to learners	How to make learners excel
Thoroughly engaging with learners	To gain creative skills in teaching and learning
Learners to be at the center of learning	To get information on leadership
By giving off our best	How to inspire ourselves including learners
Having a positive or right attitude	How to be dedicated to our work
Giving the learners love	What’s the best way of getting quality results
Not beating up and punishing learners	What methods can we employ to make learners successful
Through dedication to our work, and being prepared to learn	How can things be made to change
Going an extra mile with learners	What difference can we make

The give and gain exercise was based on the premise that each participant has something to contribute to the betterment of the school community. Therefore, it is important for each one to take responsibility for making the process a success. The exercise acknowledges the existence of potential assets within the community at any particular point in time. As a team, participants begin to realise how they can tap into each other’s potential in order to solve their problems rather than wait for outside experts. Thus the give and gain exercise negates the tendency to define communities by their problems, needs and deficiencies and prevents

them from internalising such negativity. As Charles Elliot (1999:12) concludes, like plants that grow towards their source of energy, communities also move towards what gives them a sustainable livelihood.

The asset mapping strategy

It has already been argued that the needs-based approach has a negative effect on how communities think about themselves and tends to create poverty stricken mind-sets. In contrast, the ABCD approach recognises what the

communities have, and these resources become the springboard for building capacity within the communities. To this end, facilitators engaged participants in an asset mapping exercise in order to “build an inventory of their assets and ... to see value in resources that they would otherwise have ignored, unrealised or dismissed” (Mathie and Cunningham, 2002:5). Such unrealised assets include the following:

- (i) Human assets - skills, knowledge, labour and health
- (ii) Social assets - social networks and relationships of trust, confidence and reciprocity
- (iii) Natural assets – land, water, soil, animals and climate

- (iv) Financial assets – cash crops, livestock and savings

Table 2: Outcome of Asset Mapping Exercise

Human	Social	Natural	Financial	Physical
Teachers	Culture	Land	Government	Buildings
Parents (SGB)	Traditions	Water	Donors	Electricity
Learners (287)	Councillors	Trees	Sponsors	Gas
Community	Church	Vegetation	Alumni	Desks and chairs
Council offices	Police	Manure	Computers	Roads
TUT facilitators		Climate	Laptops	Television
ShakeXperience facilitators			Internet	CD/DVD player
				Textbooks

From feedback given after the focus group discussions, it was evident that participants had begun to realize the potential assets at their disposal. These assets could be mobilized to develop not only the school but also the wider community. Mathie and Cunningham (2002) assert that the key to ABCD lies in the power of local communities to drive their own development while leveraging additional support from outside experts. The recognition of their strengths, talents and assets helps to inspire positive action for change than an exclusive focus on needs and problems. Thus the asset mapping exercise enabled the teachers and SGB to:

- (i) identify their unrealised capacities
- (ii) map out the diversity of available assets

- (v) Physical assets – roads, bridges, clinics, schools, transport, houses and sanitation.

To apply the ABCD approach, participants were grouped into pairs and asked to identify those assets that were available to the school community. At first, it was difficult for participants to identify any assets since the school was located in a rural area where people are often perceived to have ‘nothing really’. This negative perception was familiar to the facilitators but through persistent probing and questioning, participants were able to come up with the following list of assets:

- (iii) realise the relationships between local and external assets
- (iv) mobilise their resources for potential action
- (v) have more clarity on the school’s vision and mission
- (vi) be aware of the opportunities for building on their assets

Indeed, it was heartening to discover the enthusiasm that was present toward the end of the asset mapping session, especially when the gatekeepers began to reflect on what they could do to develop their school and community. When facilitators asked participants to give a summary of what they had learnt during the course of the baseline survey workshop, responses included the following:

- (i) 'Games can create a sense of focus and concentration'
- (ii) 'People can learn through play'
- (iii) 'The primacy of communication through dialogue should be observed'
- (iv) 'Leadership needs to be properly managed as observed in the group counting exercise'
- (v) 'We need to make the best out of our assets'
- (vi) 'The importance of dialogue and team spirit between teachers and learners'.

It is evident that ABCD can transform mind-sets that had become locked in negative constructions of the self to ones that can shift towards an appreciative construction of reality (Elliot, 1999). Community leaders who had 'failed' to recognise any assets in their community were able to realise the potential strengths and capacities available to them.

Conclusion

The community engagement partnership between TUT's Faculty of Arts, Faculty of Humanities, ShakeXperience and the Mpingana school community makes a formidable team geared toward advancing the school's vision, namely: *To develop a creative and original learner through effective teaching and learning*. The baseline survey workshop demonstrated how the ABCD strategy can enable TFD facilitators and practitioners to do things differently. Instead of pursuing the usual needs-based problem-solving paradigm, ABCD provides a remarkable departure towards an asset-based problem-posing paradigm. The community explores what it can do for itself by identifying and mobilising its own strengths, capacities and capabilities. The ABCD approach can therefore be regarded as one of the most effective strategies for sustainable community driven development. It seeks to discourage communities from focusing on needs, problems and deficiencies that can only be solved by outsiders. In a way, ABCD practitioners are being called upon to capitalise on the strengths and opportunities that can release the potential of target communities.

The school principal's willingness and readiness 'to listen, work together and do what was needed in order to improve,' was indicative of a shared vision and an indelible ingredient that will make the community intervention

work in the best interests of all stakeholders. It will be necessary to come up with a practical action plan that has clear targets for a more comprehensive turnaround strategy that will encompass the school management, parents, teachers and learners who are the primary stakeholders. The core of the intervention process will be to 'do things differently' in order to come up with sustainable change. There are promising opportunities for flagging the project as a 'legacy' since it remains aligned to TUT's goal of promoting mutually-beneficial community engagement partnerships. This goal fits well with ShakeXperience's vision of establishing partnerships that will enhance arts education in schools.

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