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Conceptualising an Interactive Toolkit for Skills
Enhancement

Ann Hockey, Martin Spaul, Carlos Jimenez-Bescos
and Ian Frame

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Creating Sustainable Communities: Conceptualising an Interactive Toolkit for Skills Enhancement

Ann Hockey, Anglia Ruskin University, Essex, UNITED KINGDOM

Martin Spaul, Anglia Ruskin University, Essex, UNITED KINGDOM

Carlos Jimenez-Bescos, Anglia Ruskin University, Essex, UNITED KINGDOM

Ian Frame, Anglia Ruskin University, Essex, UNITED KINGDOM

Abstract: The UK policy framework for the development of sustainable communities, dating from the late 1990's, has involved substantial changes in the working practices of urban development practitioners. The achievement of sustainable outcomes requires a range of professions, organisations, groups and individuals to work towards shared goals. Thus an emphasis on multi-agency and participatory working has become an integral component of the development of sustainable communities. Initial slow progress gave rise to a review of shortfalls in institutional capacity, and deficits in the generic skills required to enable effective multi-agency working were revealed. The policy response to these perceived deficits included initiatives to provide targeted information and training resources – at both a national and regional level – to urban development professionals and communities. This paper discusses research conducted at a regional level to develop a set of on-line resources focussed on the enhancement of generic skills. The research has addressed a wide range of conceptual and practical difficulties: the nature of generic skills; the capacity of online learning to address contextual skills; and the difficulties of integrating on-line learning into everyday working practices. The paper reviews this conceptual framework and its contribution to the design of the on-line skills resource.

Keywords: Sustainable Communities, Skills, Generic Skills, Contextual Skills, Workplace Learning, On-line Learning

Introduction

THE UK POLICY framework for the development of 'sustainable communities' (for the UK government's particular interpretation of this term see ODPM, 2003; ODPM, 2005), which began formulation in the late 1990's, has involved substantial changes in the working practices of the range of professions involved in urban development. An emphasis on multi-agency and participatory working has become an integral component of the development of sustainable communities. What had, in the early years of this century, been seen as slow progress in the creation of sustainable outcomes (see, e.g., Urban Task Force 2004) gave rise to a review of shortfalls in institutional capacity; and deficits in the generic skills required to bind multi-agency working were identified. One of a range of policy responses to these perceived deficits was the launching of a series of initiatives to provide on-line education and training resources – at both a national and regional level – to the urban development professions and to communities.

This paper discusses the initial stages of a research project conducted at a regional level to address the provision of a set of on-line resources to impart the

requisite skills for sustainable community development¹. This research is required to address a wide range of conceptual and practical difficulties: the nature of generic skills; the capacity of on-line learning to address contextual skills; and the difficulties of integrating on-line learning into everyday working practices. It has been necessary to review many of the assumptions on which the diagnosis of skills deficits have been based, and to reconstruct the perception of these deficits from alternative theoretical perspectives.

These reconstructions are used as the basis for the design of a framework for an on-line learning community in which shared conceptions of the difficulties of sustainable community development may be explored and refined. At a deeper level, this work also indicates aspects of the intractability of the problem of capacity building in the institutional framework of development in the UK. This paper is concerned largely with the skills development policy context, and the development of a theoretical framework capable of underpinning a robust educational philosophy for sustainable development skills.

¹ This work is focused on skills provision in the East of England. It is supported by an ESRC grant, the Academy for Sustainable Communities and Inspire East.



Sustainable Communities and 'Skills Gaps' - The Egan Review

A factor in UK government sustainable community policy is the perception that there are key blockages in the achievement of sustainable communities caused by 'skills gaps' amongst the professions and

community groups central to their implementation. What constitutes a skills gap, and the accepted framework for remedying these gaps, cannot be understood independently of the institutional framework within which they arise, and of the problem diagnoses carried out in a series of government-sponsored reports.



Figure1: UK Sustainable Communities Policy, Some Milestones

The Egan Review (Egan, 2004) occupies a central position in the debate concerning skills for the development of sustainable communities. See Figure 1 above for an overview of the development of sustainable community policy in the UK, and Bailey, 2005, for the recent historical context of the Egan Review. Although this report is only one among many related reports and policy documents, it serves as an example of a particular way of framing, diagnosing and remedying perceived shortages of skills relevant to the development of sustainable communities. In addition, it has been particularly influential in setting in train practical measures to address these shortages.

To underpin his analysis, Egan developed a place-based model of sustainable communities from broad definitions contained in statements of UK government policy. The standard 'three pillars' model of sustainability (see, e.g., Littig and Griessler, 2005; Bass, 2007) based on economy, environment and society was extended to a 'seven components' model. The strategic goals of a flourishing local economy, environmentally sustainable development and communities which are 'vibrant, harmonious and inclusive' were supplemented by the key institutional and physical supports for these goals: sound governance based on partnership and inclusion; a comprehensive transport infrastructure; a full range of social services; and high quality housing stock. This definition was given a degree of precision in a set of 49 indicators with which to track progress towards the achievement of sustainable community. With this model in place, the question then became one of how to operationalise it, and how to produce – in large numbers – the kind of mixed-use, high-quality urban

environments which had become the benchmark for sustainable urban regeneration (see, e.g., Franklin, 2002). The answer was provided in the form of a process model, and an analysis of the actors, roles and skills implicit in this process model. The model proposed was not a radical departure from emerging practice, but rather sought to give it coherence.

The first step in the trajectory towards sustainable communities was identified as the establishment of leadership of the development process, and the ability to draw together effective working partnerships. In this, Egan was able to draw on established UK urban regeneration practice, and the range of governance changes which had taken place since 1997 in which many of the functions once carried out by local government were placed in the hands of a range of partnerships (see, e.g. Pierre, 1999; Bailey, 2003; Lowndes and Wilson, 2003). The goals towards which these local partnerships work had to be – if the governance criteria set out in the Egan sustainable community model were to be met – the result of visioning processes carried out by the whole community; a requirement which led Egan to call for existing 'Community Strategies' to become 'sustainable communities strategies', incorporating key features from the report. Having addressed leadership and goal setting, Egan then proposed a re-design of the delivery processes for sustainable communities. These proposals covered a re-engineering of the UK planning system (embodied largely in the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004), a focus on inter-disciplinary team working in major development projects, and a cultural change in Local Author-

ities from a passive overseer of development to an active engagement in delivery.

The development process for sustainable communities envisaged by Egan involves a large number of actors, and Egan categorised these into major groupings for the purposes of skills assessment. The first category was that of the ‘core occupations’ – those most closely concerned with sustainable communities – which ranged over decision makers, the built environment occupations and a range of environmental and social occupations. The second category was that of ‘associated occupations’ – such as those involved in education and policing – and the third category was the ‘wider public’, involved as a result of the participatory nature of sustainable communities. For the development process to function effectively, each of these groups have to understand the context of their role, and possess the skills to carry out their own particular role effectively – neither of which could be taken for granted, given the altered conditions and institutional transformations which the new process model implied. In the case of occupationally specific skills, which are addressed during the professional education and continuing professional development in each of the core occupations, no particular ‘skills gaps’ were identified. Although there was a perceived under-supply of personnel in many of the core occupations, the relevant professional education structures were

deemed to be appropriate. Egan did, however, identify difficulties in the ‘generic skills’ which would enable those in the core occupations to work in the broadened multi-disciplinary, partnership-based environment which the report envisaged.

To clarify the concept of a ‘generic skill’, Egan developed a model based on a grid structure (see Table 1 below). For each of 13 identified skills, the principal behaviours implied by the possession of the skill and the knowledge which underpinned it were detailed. The 13 skills were perceived to be both central to sustainable community development and generally deficient in members of the core occupations. To remedy this situation a number of steps were recommended as requiring urgent attention. It was regarded as necessary to assess the exact extent of these ‘skills gaps’ and, in parallel, to set up the institutional framework to remedy the defects in extant professional training. Subsequent assessment has taken the form of large-scale surveys of skills gaps (see, e.g., ASC, 2007) and initiatives to develop ‘benchmarking’ and self-assessment tools which enable individuals in the core occupations to proactively address their own skills requirements. It was recommended by Egan that the lead in training in sustainable community skills was to be taken by a national centre (subsequently established as the Academy for Sustainable Communities) and a set of associated ‘regional centres of excellence’.

Table 1: Sample Skills in Tabular Form. Egan, 2004, p. 56

Skills	Behaviours	Knowledge
Inclusive visioning	Thinking: creativity Acting: entrepreneurial	The seven sustainable communities components and how they interact
Leadership	Thinking: open to change Acting: co-operation	Housing and built environment

‘Skills Gaps’: An Individual and an Institutional Perspective

Individual Skills Training and Organisational Learning

As Bailey (2005, p. 342) has pointed out, the Egan Review is not framed from a neutral perspective; rather, it frames skills development for sustainable communities through the eyes of practitioners and produces lists of skills which match the apparent requirements for the immediate implementation of government policy. Bailey develops this concern by arguing that a practitioner stance of this sort, while attempting to avoid becoming bogged down in the academic niceties of what constitutes a skill and how it is learned, leaves crucial dimensions of the skills problem unexplored. He points out that placing the responsibility for sustainable communities skills training in a newly-created body outside the universities was a conscious sidestepping of the an ‘aca-

demicisation’ of the problem, and the privileging of a pragmatic practitioner perspective. An occupational skill, outside of the most obvious physical craft skills, cannot be directly observed in action; rather, the skill is inferred as the outcome of a process of interpretation imposed upon social exchanges in the workplace. The Egan generic skills are expressed in abstract terms, and the ‘behaviours’ associated with them are not directly observable. To approach this point from the other direction: producing training materials in these skills involves interpreting them and casting them as sets of ‘training activities’. These training activities can only be shown to be relevant to the problems of sustainable community development by a process of argument. There are several possible starting points for the interpretation of working practices in sustainable community development.

The skills identified by Egan have been criticised as ‘managerialist’ (Kitchen, 2007) insofar as corres-

pond closely to those which are currently popular in business and management literature. 'Leadership', 'conflict resolution', 'breakthrough thinking', etc. may all be identified with an established literature, and with established management training courses (see, e.g., Chandon and Nadler, 2000; O'Brien and Meadows, 2003). Moreover, Egan gave no detailed account of how his particular skills set was derived from the evidence, nor did he compare it with other skills models (in contrast, see the reasoned derivation of the skills model which underpins the work of the Scottish centre for regeneration, Taylor *et al*, 2004). It is possible to interpret the Egan skills and devise a training strategy which depends on adapting this existing material to the sustainable community development context in an unreflective manner. This approach to skills training may turn out to be sound; but it does embody a strong hypothesis: that pre-existing generic skills from the world of business are largely those required in the novel set of working arrangements which surround urban regeneration.

An alternative interpretation involves switching the focus from individual to the organisational framework which surrounds the individual; hence, rather than locating a 'skills deficiency' within an individual, it becomes a property of the individual embedded in an institutional framework. This provides a contrasting way of interpreting the Egan skills, since it throws into sharp relief the assumption that "new and improved skills can be 'bolted on' to practitioners through the establishment of a national and regional centres" (Bailey, 2005, p. 349). An alternative hypothesis is that a solution to the skills gap cannot solely be based on individual 'upskilling', but may involve concerted cultural and organisational changes within the agencies and partnerships within which individuals work. Bailey (2005, pp. 345-346) points out that a broader interpretation of skills deficiencies and training was recognised in the report *The Learning Curve* produced by the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit (NRU, 2002). In this report a clear statement was made of an organisational, as well as an individual, learning strategy. Recognising that "it is not enough to help individuals learn new skills and ways of working", a case was made for changing organisational culture using 'learning organisation' principles which build the space for reflection, learning and the dissemination of new ideas into everyday working practices. In this wide-ranging vision "all organisations involved in neighbourhood renewal, be they government, business, community or voluntary will need to develop in this way" (NRU, 2002, pp. 38-39).

Detailed reinterpretations of the Egan skills have been made from this broader perspective. For example, Kagan (2007) offers a reinterpretation of the Egan skills set as essentially personal in nature,

translating them into the terms of social psychology. In this reinterpretation, Kagan stresses that occupying an effective role in a working partnership is dependent on more than simply the possession of 'first-level' skills of the kind identified by Egan; but also on higher reflective abilities which relate skills to their context of use. Kagan questions the existence of widespread skills gaps (2007, p. 171), suggesting rather that the problem is one of putting existing skills to use in newly-created partnership contexts in which roles and the rules which constrain them are ill-understood by participants (2007, p. 172). Her conclusion is that effective working would be facilitated by the provision of organisational time and space to reflect on role development (2007, p. 173). This perspective on Egan's regeneration skills echoes that developed by Stern and Green (2005) in the context of the partnership working required on WHO 'Healthy Cities' projects. Stern and Green (2005, pp. 270-271) adopt the term 'boundary work' to describe the onerous personal burdens which fall on those whose professional roles involve absorbing the structural tensions between the different organisations and cultures involved in a partnership. They found that much of the time of 'boundary workers' had to be dedicated to maintaining the partnership entity itself, rather than being expended on the overt programme aims of the partnership (2005, p. 274).

These findings are reinforced by principles developed for the management of complex organisations in a range of settings (Machado and Burns, 1998). Machado and Burns suggested that any 'complex social organisation' – of which an urban regeneration partnership could be regarded as an example – will be characterised by heterogeneous organisational modes. Organisational modes are determined by their dominant kind of relationship: market, democratic, administrative, etc. These modes will have their own organising principles which surface in a set of roles, behavioural norms, rules and ways of looking at the world; a particular set of principles enable an organisation to fulfil its specialised role and purpose. When organisations operating in different modes are brought together in a complex social organisation their incongruity becomes apparent, as boundary clashes occur when individuals working against different background principles attempt to cooperate – with each individual trying to maintain the integrity of their 'home' organisational mode in the face of difference. In such a situation Machado and Burns suggest that a complex social organisation has to construct spaces in which these tensions, inevitable because of incongruities, can be resolved informally (they use the example of the many groups and organisational modes required for large hospitals to function, and the tensions which arise when professional cultures clash). The resolu-

tion of these tensions may also involve the creation of specialist mediation and liaison roles.

These analyses suggests an alternative approach to solving 'sustainable communities skills gaps' based on a revision of partnership working practices, and the provision of instituted mechanisms to resolve 'border work' problems, rather than individually-focused 'upskilling programmes'. This approach assumes that the individual resources required to resolve coordination and cooperation problems already exist – again, another hypothesis – but the lack is in the organisational space in which to mobilise these resources and overcome the problems.

New Institutional Analyses of Urban Governance

The reorientation outlined may grounded in a theoretical perspective which can set skills and training problems in all the dimensions of the institutional context in which they occur. A framework is required which supports the analysis of institutional rules, norms and cultures, and which supports the analysis of the ways in which different institutions interpenetrate. This is necessary because the individual with 'skills deficiencies' is embedded in complex sets of norms, rules and discourses resulting from formal associations (professional groups, employer/employee relationships, as a member of an agency in a partnership working arrangement, etc.) and from informal associations (informal friendships and allegiances in the workplace, ties to wider communities, etc.). This embedding is partly constitutive of skills deficiencies, as the execution of work-related tasks is carried out by an individual working under a set of behavioural constraints.

The governance arrangements for urban regeneration projects and the construction of sustainable communities are special cases of the transformations in governance which have affected all areas – public and private – over the last 20 years. A popular theoretical framework for comprehending these changes, and analysing specific governance arrangements is that of "new institutionalism" (Lowndes and Skelcher 1998, Lowndes 2001, Lowndes and Wilson 2003).

This framework has been applied to urban governance by Healey (1999, 2004), and Coaffee and Healey (2003). In this account the intellectual basis of new institutionalist analysis is located in Giddens' (1984) structuration theory, in which social institutions are seen as the product of the everyday practice of a mass of actors; institutions which constrain, but do not determine future practice. An analysis of the

structures and formal rules of government institutions thus gives way to a detailed study of the processes, both formal and informal, enacted by groups involved in governance²; processes which range, *inter alia*, across the behavioural norms, use of knowledge, ethical standards and professional cultures of those groups. The practices of an individual actor in a working role may be determined by a range of social relations which extend beyond the formal definition of that role: by membership of professional groups, by membership of informal sub-cultures within the workplace, by their perceived duties as a citizen, etc. The social action conditioned by these relations continually re-creates them, producing the basis for the shared understandings, trust and relational resources required to support cooperative work. This analytical framework gives insight into ways in which the new networked, partnership styles of working typical of urban governance are dependent on individuals generating 'social capital' to sustain the bonds which enable partnerships to function.

Coaffee and Healey (2003) used these ideas to create an analytical framework which was then applied to urban regeneration initiatives in Newcastle based on participatory 'area committees' (Sullivan *et al*, 2001). This framework identifies three levels of analysis, which pick out progressively deeper structures at work in an initiative. The first level of analysis identifies the surface phenomena of a specific episode of urban governance, answering questions such as: who were the actors and what were their roles, where did it take place and what was the setting, how did events unfold and what did people do? The second level of analysis goes beyond surface features and asks questions about the governance processes which shaped the events which were played out: what kind of partnership structure had been formed, what discourses were used to frame the key issues, what formal roles were laid down, and how were resources controlled, etc.? The third and deepest level concerns the cultural outlook which characterises the mode of governance, and asks questions about the enduring cultural values which underpin and validate it, and how these are mobilised in defining and monitoring processes. As well as analytical depth, these three levels of analysis can also be seen to relate to timescale – moving from passing events, through evolving working practices to cultural assumptions which may endure for decades.

This theoretical perspective and analytical framework enables the question concerning 'skills gaps' to be posed in a broader way. If a sustainable communities initiative is perceived to have under-per-

² Lowndes (2001, p. 1961) stresses the point that it is inappropriate to speak of their having been a shift from 'government to governance', but it is rather the case that there has been a shift in modes of governance from hierarchical bureaucratic relationships to networked, partnership relationships.

formed, in which direction are the sources of failure sought, and what kinds of remedy are to be prescribed? If the answer is to focus on the performance of individual actors and their level of skill, then failings in the institutional and cultural structures which constrain those actors may not be directly addressed. A conscious decision might be taken, even in the light of an institutionalist analysis, to nevertheless focus on individual skills and training. This could be on the grounds that a 'trickle up' effect from individual behavioural changes will modify institutional structures. A response of the kind made in the Egan Review is not ruled out under an institutionalist framework, but it is a conscious choice made against the background of other forms of intervention.

Conclusions

Against this background it has become clear that the development of an on-line learning resource to enhance skills for sustainable community development cannot simply focus on the provision of on-line 'learning packages' aimed at enhancing individual skills. The arguments rehearsed above indicate that, even if it were possible to create appropriate decontextualised skills training packages (a problematic notion for skills which are closely bound to practice), the broader institutional dimension of sustainable communities skills gaps would not have been explicitly addressed. In the light of these difficulties, it is worth examining the extent to which an on-line learning community (see, e.g., Henri and Pudelko, 2003; Allan and Lewis 2006) might provide a medium by which skills and their underpinning knowledge, the institutional context which frames the deployment of skills, and emerging practitioner experience could be shared and developed. This community is envisaged to be open to all those in the key professions involved in the development of sustainable communities; thereby providing a 'fast track' to situated learning for participating individuals, and

providing a forum for reflection for the institutions of which they are members (Gray, 2004).

A learning community is motivated by a collaborative task; and in this case the primary task is that of capacity building within the professions concerned with the development of sustainable communities. How such a task is to be executed is, as was seen above, the subject of competing hypotheses: the injection of skills packages from other professional spheres, the development of interpersonal skills, and modifying the institutional contexts of sustainable community development. Hence, a learning community focused on sustainability skills must be constructed around a broad set of learning activities which work towards a kind of convergence: absorbing skills packages and assessing their value in working contexts; personal development and reflection on working roles and relations; and the communal identification of institutional blockages to progress. An on-line community with such complex tasks and goals requires a strong supporting framework and facilitation to retain focus (Bourhis *et al*, 2005): an input stream of relevant knowledge and skills guidance for evaluation and adaptation, and a guided learning/debating structure which recognises the different institutional levels at which issues arise (see the Coaffee and Healey analytical framework above).

The difficulties inherent in creating an on-line 'community of practice', with the sense of identity, purpose and growth which that implies (see Wenger, 1998), mirror those of the partnership working which underpins sustainable community projects. It will be necessary to create an environment in which disparate groups are able to see their interests reflected, and able to receive sufficient 'pay off' for continued membership and contribution. It is not anticipated that the creation of a learning community will constitute a 'magical' solution to sustainable community skills problems; but rather that it will provide a microcosm or laboratory in which these problems may be studied.

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About the Authors

Ann Hockey

Currently Senior Lecturer in Spatial Planning at Anglia Ruskin University and Pathway Leader for the MSc Town Planning. Research interests include the application of GIS technologies to planning issues and practice, the development of knowledge and skills in the workplace, and perception and use of the built environment by people in later life. Ann is a Chartered Town Planner (MRTPI) and Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, and is committed to strengthening the links between professional planning practice and education.

Dr. Martin Spaul

Anglia Ruskin University, UNITED KINGDOM

Carlos Jimenez-Bescos

Anglia Ruskin University, UNITED KINGDOM

Ian Frame

Anglia Ruskin University, UNITED KINGDOM

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