Trio of Books Makes Argument for the Power of Working Together for Community Change

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It is often said that "two minds are better than one," or that we can do "better together." Such statements are reflective of the idea that multiple players can accomplish more than lone wolves or individual efforts.

When it comes to community-engaged scholarship, the idea of working together is almost always referring to universities or academic units working with those outside of the academic campus in the community. Community-campus partnerships are necessary for service-learning courses to be successful. By engaging with a community, we develop first-hand knowledge and an understanding of the intricacies of the relationship between community and academe (Sanyal, 2014). Evolving over time, community partnerships are powerful organizations that spur interaction among key parties and serve to focus tasks, guide decision-making, and facilitate communication (Judd & Adams, 2008). Such partnerships are cornerstones of engaged scholarship.

In the arena of engaged scholarship, rarely is the conversation about partnership focusing on those in the community working "better together;" more often, the focus is on bettering partnerships between those in the community and those in "the academy." The three books reviewed in this essay feature a trend known as "collective impact." When it comes to collective impact, community leaders and practitioners come together around their desire to improve outcomes consistently over time. With the goal of continuous improvement, data are used to improve an outcome and the collective impact becomes part of what is done every day (Edmondson, 2012).

Increasingly, collective impact is a necessary route to another cornerstone of engaged scholarship—problem solving. This review essay focuses on three different models and approaches to collective impact. While Stroh's *Systems Thinking for Social Change* spotlights causal feedback loops within systems, Plastrik, Taylor, and Cleveland's *Connecting to Change the World* points to the power of a generative network to have an impact on a social problem. Different from the previous two books, Edmondson and Zimpher's *Striving Together* takes a case study approach in delivering lessons on collective impact by utilizing specific strategies for solving problems in the arena of education.

Previously, scholars have argued convincingly about the power of reciprocal partnerships that benefit all parties (Stewart & Alrutz, 2012). In their description and analysis of 10 cruxes for sustaining long-term, healthy relationships, the authors noted that those who are partnering in transformative relationships expect some kind of sustained commitment and change. Elsewhere, it has been said that the terms "relationship" and "partnership" are not interchangeable (Clayton Bringle, Senor, Huq, & Morrison, 2010). The former may be casual, short-term, and/or informal in nature while the latter has closeness, equity, and integrity. This distinction was especially important in Clayton et al.'s (2010) research with service-learning practitioners and researchers using the Transformational Relationship Evaluation Scale (TRES), which aimed to provide clearer nomenclature and tools to conceptualize, investigate, evaluate, monitor, and nurture partnerships.

To be effective, partnerships require both parties' extensive involvement that recognizes and legitimizes the process, as well as the creation of an organizational framework conducive for that involvement (McLean & Behringer, 2008).

In *Connecting to Change the World*, Plastrik, Taylor, and Cleveland introduce the idea that a generative network is not simply a set of people who voluntarily organize themselves for collective action to solve a large, complex social problem. The way they organize is critical to the success of the network. As they describe it, there are specific requirements, such as having minimal formal rules and structure while ensuring the decision-making is distributed throughout the network's membership. The members should be deliberate about building, strengthening, and maintaining ties with each other with the intended result being innovative creation of new products, services, and programs. These generative networks become robust and adaptive enough to continue to be effective while increasing their impact. Plastrik, Taylor, and Cleveland maintain that social-impact networks are not the same as social movements. The latter are usually big, much less coherent, and lack the focus of the former.

Connecting to Change the World offers one chapter with eight concrete elements necessary to start a social impact network—purpose, membership, value propositions, coordination/communication, resources, governance, assessment, and operating principles. Another chapter outlines a four-level connectivity scale that ranges from members simply being introduced to each other (Level 1) to the point where the members have built enough trust over multiple projects that they are comfortable seeking advice from one another (Level 4). These Level 4 connections are a critical element to building the strong core necessary for a social impact network. Later chapters explain the "C-A-P" sequence, through which members of a network "connect-to-align-to-produce" in order to develop their abilities for collective action and impact (Chapter 4), and detail how they evolve, mature, and become more complex (Chapter 5). Often, so much emphasis is placed on the problem to be solved that little attention is given to evaluating the collaboration of individuals or organizations. The final three chapters of *Connecting to Change the World* provide a framework for such an evaluation (Chapter 6), a strategy for re-setting the design if the group becomes stalled (Chapter 7), and three cardinal rules to build by (Chapter 8—trust the network, serve the network [but do not wait for it], and embrace vertigo.)

While Plastrik, Taylor, and Cleveland's book focuses on details of the network, Stroh's *Systems Thinking for Social Change* puts all of its attention on the "hows" and "whys" of what is changing. In other words, it was not about the players making change happen, but the change itself that is of primary importance. This book is built on the "creative tension" model of Peter Senge's (2006) classic, *The Fifth Discipline*, which states that the energy for change is mobilized by a discrepancy between what people want and where they are. Stroh offers a four-stage change process of readiness, commitment, focus/momentum, and understanding/acceptance. These stages are not introduced until the fifth chapter of the book, which is organized into three parts. Part One reviews some of the classic wisdom on systems while linking those systems to what is needed for social change. Part 2 provides an overview of the four-stage change process, and the final three chapters focus on the future and how systems thinking can impact the process of strategic planning (Chapter 11), evaluation (Chapter 12), and one's development over time (Chapter 13).

Both books, *Connecting to Change the World* and *Systems Thinking for Social Change*, offer step-by-step instructions for assembling people and organizations to bring about change in the community. The "theory" of Stroh's *Systems Thinking for Social Change* is complemented by the "practice" in Plastrik, Taylor, and Cleveland's description of the evolution of social change networks. At the same time, both provide ample material for the critical stages of assessment and evaluation, with Stroh going more in-depth about the processes of strategic planning and ways to track success and goal achievement. It is easy to see why the online bookseller Amazon identifies the two as "frequently bought together."

In order to understand the whole concept of collective impact, one needs the third book of this trio—Edmondson and Zimpher's *Striving Together*. Unlike *Connecting to Change the World* and *Systems Thinking for Social Chan*ge, Edmondson and Zimpher offer a book of cases focused on K–12 education. The "lessons learned" approach that this book takes starts with a convincing account of the seven-year journey of three school systems in Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky as they work toward measurable results in student achievement after initially meeting to organize

a new college readiness program for low-income students. Although it was case-study driven, the book was not absent of models or theories. The second chapter outlined the Framework for Building Cradle-to-Career Civic Infrastructure, which has four primary building blocks or pillars: shared community vision, evidence-based decision-making, collaborative action, and investment/sustainability. This framework was followed in Chapter 3 by a report on a 2011 effort by a group of thought leaders who gathered in Portland, Oregon to outline what became a Theory of Change, built on the four pillars of the Framework for Building Cradle-to-Career Civic Infrastructure.

Edmondson and Zimpher report that more than 100 communities across the country have used this framework to guide their work. A reader of *Striving Together* will be short changed if the reader stops at just reading the case studies of collective impact that were done in Portland, Oregon (Chapter 4), Richmond, Virginia (Chapter 5), Seattle, Washington (Chapter 6), and Houston, Texas (Chapter 7). These four cases flesh out the journey described in the book's opening chapter: the collaboration in Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky with the StrivePartnership to improve education in the tri-state region that includes Southeast Indiana, Northern Kentucky, and Southwest Ohio. Soon after, other communities where residents connected with ideas of the StrivePartnership on education joined in, resulting in a national StriveTogether network of at least 30 communities serving as charter members. At the time *Striving Together* was published, at least 19 more communities had joined this network, with New Zealand, Malaysia, Canada, and the United Kingdom also expressing interest.

The response to the method of collective impact is an indication of just how hungry communities around this nation and world are for strategies that work when it comes to groups working together. It speaks to the need for clear guidelines for doing such work that can get results, which is ultimately why the author of this essay decided to review these three books. There is a plethora of examples of short-term collaboration, especially in the context of service learning. While Stewart and Alrutz (2012) argue that pursuing and maintaining meaningful partnerships between universities and communities or organizations is like sustaining healthy romantic relationships, these three books together suggest that for organizations coming together, the effort is deeper than romance.

A structural model and conceptual framework such as the one Clayton et al. (2010) offered as a result of their review of literature on relationship development in service learning and civic engagement is helpful, specifically in the context of research and theory-building. Establishing and defending one's nomenclature (i.e., transactional vs. transformative) becomes a necessary goal in such work. But these three books offer more than nomenclature. Each book in its own way provides practical guidelines for community organizations working to achieve a particular end. Stroh's end product is a system that can bring about social change, while Plastrik, Taylor, and Cleveland's is a network that adds value while creating new knowledge or insight. And in writing about their efforts in collective impact, Edmondson and Zimpher's goal was all about getting community players to work toward ways to curb the number of students dropping out of school and increasing their chances of going to college and being ready for careers.

In the spirit of full disclosure, the author of this essay did not just stumble upon these three books at an academic conference. They did not appear in the mail without an intentional search for answers to the problem of how to make and sustain a group of men who had organized in a relatively rural community to address a problem— the plight of men of color. With no clear leader in place, these mostly men of color had gathered for lunch to talk about the disproportionate number of young black men not finishing high school or ending up in trouble with the law. There were discussions about the lack of role models, despite the fact that there were multiple mentoring initiatives already in place. Why were these efforts not yielding results? After months of meeting, an attempt was made to "write-up" or assess the results of sponsoring a community forum and a series of mini-conferences for middle and high school boys. It was clear that part of the success of these events was that they were sponsored by multiple organizations scattered across a region where there were many small-scale efforts. When the small-scale efforts are connected, the "collective" part of collective impact is realized. What is needed now is a way to measure/assess the "impact" part of collective impact.

Based on the wisdom from these three books, this author has determined that the group who gathered to impact the number of young black men not finishing high school or ending up in

trouble with the law did not have systems thinking the way Stroh's book suggests in mind. The group of men are just at Stage 1 of the Stroh's four-stage model: readiness. Even though these men of color have worked together to sponsor a series of mini-conferences to reach young black men, there have not been enough intentional discussions about value propositions among the men from school systems, fraternities, churches, and mentoring organizations in rural communities working together like Plastrik, Taylor, and Cleveland suggest in their guidelines for having a generative network. It would be inappropriate for the group of men of color to join the Strive Together network as the work is larger than just cradle-to-career readiness. But the bottom line of this work is the depth of analysis that can be done about the work on improving the plight of young black men. Thanks to these three books, that analysis can be much better and the journey to change will be a little bit easier. Let the real work of building a sustained effort begin.

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Acknowledgments

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