

BUILDING SKILLS

LESSON 8: ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 💡 *Develop skills for asset-based community development.*
- 💡 *Learn to see and cultivate individual, community, and institutional gifts and resources.*

LESSON OVERVIEW

Asset-based community development is a democratic skill that helps identify, cultivate, and catalyze the talents or gifts in a community. This lesson introduces an interactive activity that helps participants learn to recognize community assets and resources.

SUGGESTED PLAN [🕒 75 minutes]

LESSON PREPARATION

1. Review the following resources or others focused on asset-based community development:

- Online publications from the Asset-Based Community Development Institute, <https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/publications/Pages/default.aspx>
- John Kretzmann & John McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets* (ACTA Publications, 1993). http://www.povertystudies.org/TeachingPages/EDS_PDFs4WEB/ABCD-Bldg-communities-from-inside-out.pdf
- Byron White, *Navigating the Power Dynamics Between Institutions and Their Communities* (Kettering Foundation Press, 2009). https://www.kettering.org/sites/default/files/product-downloads/Navigating_Power_Dynamics.pdf

2. Bring a half-full glass of water to the session to use as the opening activity (see "Large-Group Overview," below).

3. Choose a space with a chalkboard or whiteboard, or set up a flip chart, to record responses from the interviewing activity.

LARGE-GROUP OVERVIEW [• 25 minutes]

Begin by presenting the half-filled glass of water. Ask participants what they see in the glass.

Acknowledge that for some people, the glass is half-empty; for others, it's half-full. Indicate that these different perspectives parallel the perspectives that underlie needs-based versus asset-based approaches to community development.

Note that it's much more common for experts and professionals to look at communities from a "needs" or deficit perspective—to see communities as half-empty. We see this all the time: it permeates our popular culture and media; it is also the dominant model of development. As an example, ask participants what needs or deficits they hear about in a given under-resourced local community. Record the responses on the board or flip chart.

Next, explain some of the negative effects of needs-based approaches, according to organizers such as John McKnight and Byron White:

- They inflict a negative and “de-habilitating” collective mindset on people and communities.
- They increase reliance on outside experts, who build a sort of industry on poverty and needs.
- They turn citizens into consumers, rather than producers.
- They overlook valuable resources and potential for change.

Explain the importance of an alternative model of community development: asset-based community development, or ABCD. ABCD asks those involved in community development to see communities for their assets or gifts—that is, as glasses half-full.

This approach, McKnight and Kretzmann argue, helps communities make change “from the inside out.” This entails focusing on the assets of a community and mobilizing these assets for positive community change. The process is therefore community-driven, as opposed to professional-driven, although it includes an important role for professionals as experts “on tap, not on top.”

Finally, note that this process can build community, something social scientists sometimes call “social capital”—the relationships, networks, and bonds between people. This is different from physical or financial capital, but just as important.

Make note of the differences between *bonding capital* (community among a tight-knit group) and *bridging capital* (community among diverse networks). Ask the group for examples of bonding and bridging capital.

INDIVIDUAL ASSET-MAPPING ACTIVITY IN PAIRS [⌚ 10 minutes]

Ask participants to pair up (ideally with someone they don’t know well). Have them think about their individual assets/gifts. Note that they may be amazed by how many of their gifts are unknown to others, or even to themselves.

Then ask pairs to interview their partners and make a list of all of the skills, talents, and capacities they are able to draw out. Prompt participants to ask their partners about different types of gifts, such as:

- Gifts of the hand—practical skills such as cooking, speaking a foreign language, computer skills, playing an instrument, etc.

- Gifts of the head— knowledge and information, such as subjects you know about, places you've been, local knowledge.
- Gifts of the heart—passions or interests, such a passion for learning or for listening to stories.

LARGE-GROUP HARVESTING [🕒 15 MINUTES]

Ask pairs to report out on the assets and gifts they discovered in their partners.

Record individual assets on a board or flip chart.

ASSET-MAPPING ACTIVITY IN SMALL GROUPS [🕒 10 MINUTES]

Introduce citizen associations and institutions as the next stages of asset-mapping which build upon individual gifts. Explain what is meant by citizen associations, which may include places of worship, clubs, cultural groups, or other groups.

Introduce what is meant by local institutions, which may include schools, libraries, businesses, and health providers; also note the importance of physical resources like parks, abandoned spaces, gardens, and fields.

Divide participants into small groups. Ask groups to work together to map the citizen associations, institutions, and physical resources of a community they know (this may be the school, campus, or a local neighborhood). Make a listing of the associations/institutions, along with contact information and a short summary of their mission.

LARGE-GROUP HARVESTING & REFLECTION [🕒 15 MINUTES]

Have groups report out the assets. Record them on a board or flip chart.

Ask participants to reflect on ABCD as an approach and a skill. Do they think this approach is important or valuable? Why or why not? If so, in what contexts would it work best? How might they use it in the future?

