

Chapter 2

Towards a Concept of Solution-Focused Teaching: Learning in Communities: About Communities—for the Benefit of Communities

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The editors of this book hold a clear position that well-conceived curriculum design is essential if students in higher education are to be enabled to apply and integrate their knowledge for expression of their social, cultural, moral, ethical and political capital. They share a strong sense that this should be related to educational experiences which produce self-determining learners, who have the ability to work with complex situations and to navigate multiple interplays of variables. This is a central feature of their commitment to heutagogic approaches (Bhoyrub et al. 2010) and an emerging concept of ‘solution-focused teaching,’ in the first instance for community development and engagement.

In the context here, corresponding with the editors’ interests, I will allude to communities in two ways. Firstly as geographically situated groups of people (such as in a city or local town) and secondly as communities of learners, working together to make sense of complex situations in the act of problem solving for a common good. The latter may involve students working alongside people in the community in shared endeavour which is mutually beneficent, as a ‘Community of Practise’ (Lave and Wenger 1991). As such, the main focus here is on ‘situated learning’ (Lave and Wenger 1991) contextualised by communities and their unique, distinctive, settings. This includes physical placements of students in communities, but also learning activities that are consistently connected to examples of community ‘realities’ and historical precedents.

This chapter has a somewhat unusual origin. As a product of my holding similar (perhaps heutagogic) values as the editors, I was invited by them to offer a presentation and discussion session entitled ‘Solution-Focused Teaching’ at an event centred on ‘Community Development and Engagement’ at the Higher Education Academy (HEA) York, U.K., in 2014. I initially perceived this as being somewhat outside of

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my immediate field as a higher education and rogue, even though I have a longstanding interest in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) per se (see Boyer 1990) and the theorisation of curriculum and design for learning. However, a search of the literature indicated a relative dearth of publications linked to my immediate brief for the event, with the main connections allied to 'solution-focused' being in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) (see Dobson 2010), notions of 'Solution-Focused Thinking' (Winbolt 2015) and Solution-Focused Therapeutic approaches (see Myers 2007). The sources are predominantly orientated toward clinical issues, with some emerging work in Solution-Focused Nursing (McAllister, et al. 2006). However, as each has a focus on learning, cognition and links with feelings and behaviours, they offer insights into the notion of being 'Solution-Focused' as a curriculum and teaching mission in broader terms. My principal aim here is promoting further discussion and reflection on potential approaches, with particular reference to social sciences (and other professional and academic disciplines which gravitate towards communities) for the purpose of stimulating further elaboration of approaches to teaching, emanating from the questions and suggestions raised in the aforementioned HEA presentation. As such, two principal thoughts emerged that prompted the essence of this writing:

- (a) the potential to further elaborate the idea of solution-focused curriculum design and implementation (including teaching and assessment) in the form of a 'mash-up' of ideas from existing theoretical positions and practises, and
- (b) a compelling notion of 'community' extended to communities of learners, who learn in communities, about communities, alongside community members and 'experts' in the field, ultimately for the benefit of communities.

I suggest, in alignment with Bhoyrub et al. (2010), that what follows below is in the spirit of realising heutagogic learning conditions for students but:

...rather than viewing heutagogy as another educational revolution, it can be viewed as an evolutionary step toward melding education and training with the life-world determinates of adult learners.

So, I pose the following questions and foci and make an initial consideration of them so that they can be picked up in the dialectic spirit and moved on by others with interest in this area of work in higher education:

1. *Learning*: What skills, knowledge values and attributes would solution-focused individuals, as a product of their learning, be able to demonstrate? What types of learning may be associated with such attributes? Which theoretical positions may assist in the conception of solution-focused teaching?
2. *Teaching*: How may we teach for such development of such attributes in authentic, meaningful, ways that will be beneficial to the learners and communities? What may 'Solution-Focused Teaching' actually look like in action?
3. *Assessment*: How may we consider assessment that complements this type of learning and teaching with links to enhanced understanding, improved practise and of benefit to communities?

And finally how these considerations can impact on:

4. *Community Engagement and Development*: How can the above be informed by the notion and principles of a 'Learning Community' (Lave and Wenger 1991) and be located in the reality of community settings both for learning to take place and also promote the spirit of 'service learning' (see Cipolle 2010) for the benefit of communities?

Establishing such a mindset for 'solution-focused' approaches allied to community engagement and development through students' curricula experiences provides a vehicle for alignment with the notion of 'supercomplexity' offered by Barnett (2011) suggesting the need for students to emerge with the fortitude to navigate an increasingly uncertain world as a legacy of their university education. He advised that the relationships between higher education, knowledge and society should and can only be considered in an integrated way. This relationship is core to thinking about curriculum approaches linked with community development here and aligns with the (Barnet and Coate 2004) notion of a tri-partite between knowledge (epistemology), actions (practises) and of being and becoming (ontological) and their interrelationships (Barnet and Coate 2004). I have used this as a strong steer to anchor thinking in respect of the learning, teaching and assessment approaches offered below.

Curriculum Design

Sound curriculum design begins with attention to the type of learning that one wishes to develop in individuals and groups of learners. It is learning and learner centred. Once this is decided and articulated the next step is to adopt, adapt or develop teaching approaches which will maximise the opportunities for those designated types of learning to be achieved. This is through the design of activities and use of strategies focused on the skills, knowledge, attitudes and values embodied in the desired learning. It follows that one should then, similarly, arrive at assessment or measurement/evaluation strategies which will enable teachers and learners to be able to judge if the learning has occurred and to what effect in terms of its impact and quality (in terms of both students' understanding, application and community benefits). This will involve grading and the construction of developmental feedback. This represents joined up thinking in curriculum design and is the essence of Biggs' notion of 'Constructive Alignment' (see Biggs and Tang 2009).

However, placing the design of assessment at the end of the process of teaching is an oversimplification given its potential as a formative development tool which can be built in, progressively during teaching, with ongoing feedback to students. This formative assessment promotes continuous development and inform intervention by the teacher whilst students are engaged in learning experiences. To this extent such formative assessment is both integrated within teaching and also contingent in that it serves to provide data about learning, acting as an ongoing reflective, diagnostic function that enables the teacher's responsive questioning, advising and other interventions that may be offered. Formative assessment, coupled with

summative ‘end-on’ assessment thus presents itself as Assessment for Learning (A4L) approach as well as assessment of learning and the feedback from teachers (and other experts such as community members and stakeholders) provides obvious developmental potential (see Schofield 2014).

I will address the four questions and foci (related to Learning; Teaching; Assessment and Community Development) in the sections below in an attempt to synthesise an initial position which may helpfully inform future debate and action. This is in attempt at producing a fresh look at the idea of a ‘pedagogy of community development and engagement’ which was core to my initial contacts with the editors of this book. It is offered as a framework for reflection and stimulus for further consideration in university social science curricula with perhaps broader potential for adoption and adaptation in other cognate areas. It is thus a tentative framework and constitutes an honest work in progress from a concerned practitioner.

Learning

The notion of ‘solution-focused’ is perhaps problematic as a term in itself and could be better framed as ‘solution oriented’ to acknowledge that problems may not always have an immediately definitive answer or indeed may have many potential solutions with multiple constraints associated with each. This isn’t meant to be pedantic, but aims to acknowledge subtly the existence of complex problems which reflect the nature and unique situatedness and sociopolitical contexts both surrounding and within communities anywhere in the world. Real problems, challenges, current and past, are posed by our natural and social environments and are great sources to stimulate critical thinking (both historically and in real-time communities). They offer great potential for consideration of interdisciplinary collaboration (See Schofield 2013a, re interdisciplinary complex problem solving and the derivation of problem scenarios from natural disasters). A challenge in any solution-focused approach is to consider the student’s point of entry and confidence levels in problem solving and to what extent they may experience dissonance when a finite ‘correct’ answer may not be immediately available to them. I suggest that this is one of the features of learning that leads to the often calm disposition of experts and their teams in complex problem solving in challenging scenarios. Experts see and also feel the stresses of problems differently to novices (Schofield 2013a, b, op cit). Thoughtful, planned preparation of students is an absolute necessity if they are to acquire the resilience that underpins confidence in working with uncertainty.

Knowledge alone is an ineffective tool if uncoupled from problem-solving experiences. I suggest that exposure of students to complex, open-ended, problem-solving activities (with a trajectory from simulations and case studies to real engagements) provides the necessary opportunities to develop internal resilience and confidence to work with uncertainty. It involves identification and appraisal of multiple potential solutions with reference to precedence in the literature or through creative, novel, plans of action which may, to a greater or lesser extent, draw upon applying and integrating existing knowledge. It may inherently necessitate students

to undertake research and enquiry in a community setting. The ability to work with and within uncertainty and change is central to Barnett's (1997) assertion about the need for graduates with such characteristics. A key part of the skills set, alongside ability to use knowledge, should be ethical awareness and cogniscence of the future ramifications of the actions of individuals and groups in society. This must be coupled with ability to understand the components of a problem, to make connections with knowledge of precedent (successful, unsuccessful and sometimes unethical) approaches (where available) and to be able to apply such to novel problem spaces that are (and may be) encountered in community settings where learning is to be situated.

Given that most community settings will involve diverse interactions, between diverse services and constituencies (e.g. medical, social, charitable etc.) a concept of solution focused teaching invites us to consider the importance of authentic learning experiences involving interdisciplinarity, team-working, communication, negotiation and other skills that support effective decision making and action.

Acquired expertise in community engagement and development is considered in this context as a function of knowledge in the discipline, of precedent and potential problems, ability to work with data and evidence and to manage a phase of informed consideration prior to selecting (tested or novel) solution paths. It is hoped, that if the learning experiences leading to such expertise are well constructed, that individuals will become better equipped to enter into society's communities to best effect, either in employment, in voluntary roles or as members exerting their own positive agency.

A further challenge that may need to be addressed through teaching is helping students to appreciate and navigate experiences they may encounter at the point of their employment, or any such similar institutionalisation into a defined role such as a volunteer or advocate, that 'politics' may prevail, precluding or derailing activity, or in a positive contrasting sense, serving to support social justice and pursuit of ethical and moral outcomes. This is allied to important consideration in the curriculum of sustainable development in terms of accountability for our actions, both individually and collectively, and of their future impact. I suggest solution-focused approaches for community development, cannot be taught as though existing in a political vacuum and without dialogues that explore and challenge this aspect of complexity.

So in summary I suggest some core attributes of this emerging position on solution-focused learners should include:

- Being resilient problem solvers with ability to work with uncertainty with a focus on finding solutions (which may be unprecedented and thus involve the confidence to be creative)
- Having knowledge and experiences which include real examples of successes and failures (informed by their engagement with the relevant literature and experts)
- Possessing skills to work in teams and settings which are diverse and often interdisciplinary
- Being morally and ethically aware with a commitment to responsibility for sustainability.

When learning is oriented ultimately to making a difference to communities and their sustainable future, with students learning about communities, in real communities for their mutual benefit, it is not surprising that many students, in the spirit of Mezirow's 'Transformational Learning' (1991) find the experience life changing. It is most often, the unique authenticity of situated community engagement through 'placements', that predisposes learning that truly lasts (Mentkowski 2000) as a desirable result of successful teaching design.

As I state earlier, solution-focused curriculum is arguably a 'mash-up' informed by a number of pre-existing theoretical and conceptual positions on learning. Both the editors and I agree on the importance of students learning in real community settings which can impact on feelings and important values of respect and other aspects of the human affective domain.

In describing teaching and assessment approaches in the next sections and in emphasising the significance of the community as a focus for learning, I have drawn particularly from the positions and useful sources in Table 2.1 which are also referenced in the chapter. They are not intended to be an exhaustive list, but an attempt to underpin the broad teaching approaches suggested in relation to the existing theoretical standpoints.

Teaching

Below is a selection of suggestions for practical teaching approaches to 'Community Development and Engagement.' These are related to the aspects of learning summarised in the previous section. Suggestions include:

Providing access to knowledge (e.g. in cognate disciplines such as built environment, public health, social science etc.) in the form of real exemplars and precedents in the form of successful and unsuccessful case studies (from teachers and community members as experts in addition to the literature) including manipulation of data and its analyses. This is to sit alongside core discipline concepts, assisting with application and integration of knowledge.

Giving opportunities to see and hear experts modelling problem solving, recounting their experiences and their reflections in and on action (Schön 1987), and on the consequences of their actions. This can be through using invited speakers in face to face real time or online, include opportunities for questions and answers and be complemented by video clips of such activities for asynchronous use. Roundtable discussions are a worthwhile tool, involving expert panel members and community representatives (such as users of social services and their carers, community housing associations, advocacy services and charities etc.).

- (a) Designing for multiple opportunities to apply and integrate knowledge into complex problems (either real or manufactured by teachers and community representatives) which are integrated into formal classroom teaching and which involve consideration of the merits of alternative solutions and their projected implications (including dilemmas, ethics and sustainability). These activities

Table 2.1 Sources and positions which are helpful in conceptualising learning in community settings

Position/sources	Contextualisation—learning teaching and assessment opportunities characterised by
Transformative Learning (Mezirow 1991)	Learners undergo experiences which impact on changes in their worldviews where they may be enlightened by new ideas or ways of thinking followed by them making life changes and decisions based upon examination of their own values and responsibilities
Experiential Learning (Kolb 1984)	Learning through experience involving reformulating understanding and approaches to future actions through reflection and dialogue
Reflective Learning (see Schön 1987; Driscoll 2007)	Learning through reflection in action (often in dialogue with others) and after action, projecting towards enhanced understanding and improved actions in the future
Affective Learning (Krathwohl et al. 1964)	Consideration and examination of one's own feelings experienced during learning activities, those of others, and how they relate to existing attitudes and values and thoughts about actions and interventions that may be taken and their long-term consequences
(a) Deep Learning (Marton and Säljö 1997) and (b) Active Learning and EXIT-M (Schofield 2013b)	(a) Deeper learning that goes beyond surface engagement with the experience and involves application and integration of knowledge, dialogue, problem solving, argument and synthesis which draw on and develop higher cognitive, critical thinking skills (b) Active learning strategies which encourage collaborating, designing and implementing solutions to problems, working in teams, presenting ideas and findings to others etc. A key focus is on strategies to support observation, engagement, reflection and dialogue
Learning and Sustainable Development (Ryan 2012)	Opportunities for consideration of the implications of actions for the future (of communities) and sustainability. This may involve sociopolitical foci, ethics and consideration of individual and collective responsibility for actions
Social Constructivism (see Fox 1997)	Learning by building upon existing knowledge and ideas/schemata as a function of social (community) interaction, dialogue and negotiation of meaning
Communities of Practise (Lave and Wenger 1991)	Working towards common ends through shared interest and endeavour (within and for communities)
Situated Learning (Lave and Wenger 1991)	Learning in real-world contexts, in the authentic (community) space
Service Learning (Cipolle 2010)	Learning which includes activity leading to positive, beneficial, contributions (to communities and their development)

can provide a useful developmental contribution to acquisition of skills, confidence and resilience essential to being effective community-based activities. This should involve contextual and data analyses and careful articulation of the problem-space, exploration and identification of potential solutions, focus on ethical and moral domains, and, as above, due consideration of potential impact and risks associated with particular solution paths and sustainability. Planning exposure to simulations and group problem solving thus acts as a deliberate,

formative, prelude to working with real, authentic, community-based situations, projects and problems. This should involve contextual and data analyses and careful articulation of the problem-space, exploration and identification of potential solutions, focus on ethical and moral domains, and, as above, due consideration of potential impact and risks associated with particular solution paths and sustainability.

- (b) Planned opportunities for direct ‘placement’ experiences the community. This is situated learning, working with and for the community and relates to operating ‘Communities of Practise’ (Lave and Wenger 1991) in terms of partnership with and service to the community. As it has to be located within authentic contexts it can be achieved through voluntary activity and other types of service learning, by working on projects commissioned to support the administration and marketing of charities, or through professional work placements in health and social care arenas for example.
- (c) Provision for periods of individual and group reflection on all of the above (usefully as part of assessment), supported and challenged by peers and experts (from within the communities being served and from academe) thus stimulating reflection, re-positioning of solutions in retrospect or affirmation of their actions. This is all part of learning together in and for the community.
- (d) Mentoring and coaching by University teachers and also by community-based professionals, leaders, stakeholders etc. as appropriate, to supply support and challenge and to provide a further source of knowledge to support development of students. This will often be in a contingent fashion as a student’s community placement develops over time.

Curriculum design and objectives for solution-focused community engagement and development may helpfully be informed further by Mezirow’s ten steps in transformative learning as below. This is based on Brock et al. (2012) who summarise the notion of transformative learning as being the ten steps predicted by Mezirow which may precipitate change in worldview. Some suggestions are added as to how these may translate into considerations for designing engaging teaching activities (once more to promote discussion) as follows:

- a disorienting dilemma (e.g. an authentic, perhaps pressing, community issue, in need of support, expertise, with a call for collaboration)
- a critical assessment of assumptions (e.g. reflection on why support is important, perhaps both in terms of actions needed and ethical commitment to beneficence)
- recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change (e.g. recognition that the community has needs and there is shared commitment to the need for development)
- exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions (e.g. planning, negotiating, and working in concert in the community)
- self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame (e.g. examination of one’s own values and beliefs)
- provisional trying of new roles (e.g. action as practise and reflection in real-world settings of the community)

- planning of a course of action (e.g. problem solving)
- acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans (e.g. learning through active engagement, dialogue and reflection)
- building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships, and a reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective (acquisition of competence, resilience, understanding of roles of self and others)

The key, important consideration in designing curricular experiences, is to align theory with practise in teaching and assessment and to effectively 'keep it real.' This is not only relevant in terms of student motivation (through connecting the abstract with the often more interesting concrete aspects of practical examples and exemplification) and development of higher order critical thinking but also to soliciting buy-in and commitment to ongoing support from other professionals and community members in the broadest sense. Their focus will often be primarily on positive community developments (alongside an educational mission to which you may be asking them to subscribe) and they will need to see the benefits of student engagement.

Assessment

The section above alludes to the type of learning experiences and teaching that may be needed as antecedents to gaining the attributes of a solution-focused learner. So what may be the essence of the relationship between solution-focused learning opportunities and the role of assessment?

The practical teaching and learning approaches above must be aligned with meaningful, developmental assessment which reinforces learning through the application and integration of knowledge in authentic ways. A prime intention of the teaching and assessment should be, I suggest, to enhance students' capacity to know what to do, when, why and for them to have an informed sense of the limitations and implications that their actions (past and future) may have. This may be achieved by a strong orientation of assessment towards problem solving about community contexts, through real-world immersion in communities and assessment of activities learners undertake out in the community settings themselves. Discussion, access to experts and mentoring add to the effectiveness of the learning and make strong contributions as developmental, formative assessment experiences (York 2003). Formative assessment should include opportunities for discussion and feedback that can be supplied by community members, peers and tutors/mentors before, during and after a community engagement experience. This ultimately adds value to the capstone nature of summative assessment and ensures alignment with the learning experience in a continuum of planned development.

Below I suggest a simple frame for thinking about an assessment approach based upon a commitment to praxis, in terms of development of a sense of one's ability to

consciously commit knowledge and skills to action. This frame is ‘What? So what? Now what?’ It is a simple model of reflection (after Driscoll 2007) which I have found particularly effective with students in health, education and social sciences. I have adapted it as follows for the purpose of solution focused learning to be aligned with assessment design. The following questions serve as a scaffold (see Hogan and Pressley 1997) to focus thinking, reflection and ultimately to structure and form to reporting for assessment purposes. It is essentially a Vygotskian approach, where the scaffolding acts as both a framework to stimulate, harvest and collate students’ ideas and also as a tool to assist with writing discussion, reflection, planning and justifying future developments. I have no doubt that the questions can be adopted, adapted and further developed to this end. The core components are:

- What? (Focused on describing and focussing on developing an initial understanding of the context)
- So what? (Focused on the next stage, making sense of the context and considering potential actions and consequences)
- Now what? (Focused on planning for reasoned and justified action)

These are expanded below:

What? (Focused on describing and focussing on developing an initial understanding of the context):

What is the descriptive context of the community issue or challenge that is to be or has been addressed? What precedents exist in the literature related to the same or related contexts? What can you extract from your reading and from your previous life experiences and from teaching which helps you make sense of the challenges you are addressing and pursuing solutions for? What is your preliminary evaluation as a consequence of these considerations?

So what? (Focused on the next stage, making sense of the context and considering potential actions and consequences):

How does the above help you to analyse the issue or problem in terms of your consideration of a potential solution or solutions? Are there alternative solutions? What solution or solutions are preferable and why? Is there an evidence base? How are your selections rationalised? What are/were the strengths and weaknesses of such solutions and why? What are/were the longer term implications of the solution/s? Does the situation require a novel solution? If so, why? Finally, what is/are your preferred solution/s and why?

Now what? (Focused on planning for reasoned and justified action):

What, after your detailed summary analysis above is your suggested way or way/s forward? What is your justification? What, if any, are the unresolved issues questions and concerns or caveats arising from your analysis that may require further discussion and reflection? Why are they so? And finally, after completing your action/s in the community, what were the outcomes and how, as a result of your experiences and the considerations above, are you thinking and or practising differently? What you may do differently in the future and why?

These prompts, are intended as a starting point, to match with the teaching and link with the authentic experiences of the learners, whether such authenticity is addressed through case studies and simulations or through a situated placement in a community. They are not only offered as a tool for students to use during assessment linked to teaching but also as an initial frame of questions for use in formative teaching and mentoring activities. It is an imperfect first pitch, but I suggest it is highly applicable in supporting students in analysis of what has been and what might be in their experience of engagement in community settings. The outcomes are focused on developing the learner, but also on beneficent, real, activity orientated towards the actual community setting. It is an assessment strategy that supports learning in, about, through and for communities which is a central theme of this chapter.

Community Engagement and Development

The potential for community development and involvement of students as key agents, partners and learners is the key theme running through this chapter. It is arguably heutagogic in nature when related to solution focused learning as described. I emphasise that this is of particular significance in terms of universities' exploration of individual and collective social responsibility and future sustainability of communities. Learning in communities, about communities, through and for the benefit of communities is a compelling objective and model through which learning is helpfully conceptualised as shared endeavour where students and community members have opportunities to learn and develop alongside each other in partnership.

Conclusion

Winbolt (2015) invites us to consider a Solution Focused Thinking approach which “values simplicity in philosophy and language and aims to discover ‘what works’ in a given situation, simply and practically” and focuses on “constructing solutions rather than dwelling on problems”.

Albeit that his context is one of therapy, his position strengthens the call for application and integration of knowledge in authentic community settings and the rich, deeper learning (Marton and Säljö 1997) that goes with it. In essence, in addition to the growth of what is described as tacit knowledge (Polyani 1966), which is accumulated and applied almost unconsciously and is almost unavoidable in such immersive learning in communities, the rich experiences suggested above provide students with multiple, deliberately planned, opportunities to pursue consciousness of their competence (Dubin 1962) and development of expertise. I argue that this articulates strongly with heutagogy and with the praxis expected of experts and all those with ability to exercise social and cultural capital. Solution Focused curricula, teaching and authentic assessment, manifesting as thoughtfully designed educational experiences, can serve both students and communities to good effect.

In summary, cognate discipline learning and interdisciplinary studies (e.g. in the built environment, social sciences, public health etc.), if focused on realistic and real community challenges and activities go a long way to contributing to the objectives above. All is strengthened if students are immersed in community-based activities which provide the space for application, integration and development of their knowledge and skills base in a solution-focused way. This supports the development of critical thinking, confidence and resilience and adoption of maxims of authenticity, situatedness, learning with and in support of a community and its members at the heart of the approach. It deliberately and actively couples educational intentions with a beneficent ethic. The arguments for a well-conceived curriculum experience which involves placements and voluntary, service-learning models that include assessment modes which support community engagement and development become clearer, credible and indeed emerge as arguably axiomatic.

This chapter constitutes a first pass attempt to begin to elaborate a solution-focused curricula approach and is a first response to the editors' challenge. I propose that it aligns with their concern to have students who are supported to truly exercise their learning about community development, heutagogically, exceeding the constraints of theorisation in abstract in the classroom, and thus ultimately eliciting shared benefits for all involved.

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