

Invited Book Review

Community work theory into practice

Edited by McArdle, Karen, Briggs, Sue, Forrester Kirsty, and Garrett, Ed.
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Written by a team embedded in practice experience but underpinned by ideas and academic knowledge, explicitly setting out to show us that ‘theory and practice in community work are inseparable’ (p. 6), this book, *Community Work: Theory into Practice* (McArdle et. al., 2024), provides a timely resource to respond to several challenges facing community workers and their educators. As a community work educator, supporting students on the journey to developing a strong foundational praxis is both the core purpose and one of the greatest challenges of the work. Sparking learners to draw the links between theory and practice is a perennial problem, as students who are embedded in their own lived or practice experiences struggle to see how, or why, they might draw links to broader theoretical concepts. Likewise, students who may have been drawn to study the ideas that underpin community work as a discipline can, at the outset, struggle to see how these ideas can shape their practice approach to the everyday, complex and sometimes competing demands of communities, employers and funders.

The authors set out to stimulate interest in ideas but are conscious that they have a ‘broad scope and field of practice’ (p. 1) to cover. As such, they see this contribution as a starting point for further exploration of ideas or theories, rather than a comprehensive guide to the topics and themes covered. The authors are clear too, on their audience. This book will interest not only those who are learning about, teaching, or writing about community development, but offers insights for experienced practitioners who are immersed in ‘doing’ community work. The authors contend that as professionals committed to reflective practice, community workers should seek to systematically reflect on, and review, their own knowledge, skills, and values. Such reflection also requires action to meet emerging practice and professional development needs. A welcome feature of the book is

the authors' emphasis on the workplace as a learning environment that can support this sort of action. They foreground the learning that occurs as a result of 'an exchange of practice between peers, a practitioner and a manager, or a student and a workplace supervisor' as vitally important in sustaining good practice (p. 9). This book positions itself, then, as a resource for practitioners who wish to develop or refresh their knowledge of the theory and principles of community work or who may want to explore emerging ideas and areas of interest, as they arise in practice.

The authors describe upfront their own writing process and are mindful of the limitations faced in seeking to cover such a broad field. The structure they arrive at allows this book to speak in some way to the full range of the desired audience. Acknowledging the interconnectedness of many of the ideas they present within the book, the different chapters are distinct and relatively succinct, with each one placing a focus on important underpinning concepts such as 'participation' or 'social justice', or looking at a particular practice skill, such as 'working with communities' or 'networking'. Beyond these helpful thematic linkages, the chapters provide insight into allied disciplines such as youth work and adult learning, providing insight into areas of work where good community work should be generating meaningful connections. The book also considers emerging and evolving practice skills such as community arts, digital work, and community research.

Notwithstanding the diversity of the topics covered, each chapter follows a similar structure, which allows for ease of reading. The authors first introduce the core concept or content, before mapping out some central ideas and the thinkers who have developed them. This foundational knowledge is then built upon by providing a case study of how these ideas might be applied in practice. This is a practical approach to meeting the challenge of linking theory to practice that they seek to address, and which is of concern to community work educators such as this reviewer and many of my colleagues. The use of quotes from their research with practitioners where they are describing, explaining or reflecting on how they have carried out their work and sought to grapple with the ideas presented, models how to overcome another perennial challenge faced by many practitioners, from novice to experienced community workers—how to 'do' reflection. In a temporal and cultural context where we often feel pressure to have all the answers instantly, reading about how others think about or reflect on their work shows readers that it is okay to not have immediate answers, but rather that learning and reflecting can, and should be, a work in progress. Finally, each chapter sets out some 'Principles in Practice' highlighting key takeaways from the preceding section and closes by posing some 'Challenge Questions' which generate a starting point for reflection on both the material contained the chapter, but also on our own practice and context.

Naming the UK National Occupational Standards and focus on the values of the Scottish Community Learning and Development Standards Council at the start of the book will surely be a useful marker for practitioners in the relevant jurisdictions and provides a context for some of the choices made in the language used in the text overall. This, of course, will be different for those who practice in other jurisdictions. In the Irish context, for example, the All-Ireland Standards for Community Work have proven to be invaluable in setting out the values, knowledge, skills, and qualities that underpin community work practice (AIEB, 2016) and in developing a shared understanding among funders, employers and other stakeholders about the core elements of the discipline. Beyond the significance of local contexts, useful also is the acknowledgement of an explicit value base for community work at a global level, such as that articulated by the International Association for Community Development (IACD)—committing to ‘promoting participative democracy, sustainable development, rights, economic opportunity, equality, and social justice, through the organization, education, and empowerment of people within their communities’ as ‘the glue’ (p. 12) that connects the wide world of community work. Within a profession that engages with complex, transdisciplinary problems and contexts, such shared definitions are essential to ensuring that we maintain common understandings of the purpose and core ideas of the discipline and our practice.

Overall, this book fulfills its own goal of introducing a broad range of ideas to underpin a wide range of practice concerns. It provides an accessible resource that can be dipped in and out of by workers and learners alike and, in acknowledging the gaps in what was included, generates the impetus for readers to go deeper into their own areas of interest. Beyond this, in sharing their concerns about what thinkers or theorists to include, the authors also surface what feels to be a real challenge for those community workers whose roles are now primarily as educators. How do we find the balance between old and new thinkers? Which ideas do we rely on? Whose ideas do we foreground in our classes and in our practice? At a time when curricula, rightly, seek to decolonize and diversify, we must all ask the classic community work question, ‘who is not in the room?’. The answer is not edifying, as in many cases, marginalized voices still struggle to come to the fore and certain narratives and traditions continue to occupy centre stage. Yet, as the authors acknowledge, it is difficult to ignore Freire, whose ideas, 50 years later, still feel fundamental to the practice of community work. The classic ideas of Alinsky, Gramsci and Foucault also appear across different chapters, joined by somewhat newer voices such as Bhopal, Cleaver, Emejulu, and Ledwith. There remains much work to be done in asking and responding to questions posed however and it is a challenge that we must all reflect and act upon

as we consider who we listen to, read and talk or teach about community work practice and theory. Nonetheless, *Community Work: Theory into Practice* provides a useful resource for those seeking to draw links between their practice and the theory that supports it.

Reference

All Ireland Endorsement Body for Community Work Education and Training. (2016).

All Ireland Standards for Community Work. Community Work Ireland, Galway.

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