Chapter 5
Building Communities in Action

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5.1 Introduction

Building Communities in Action is a relational framework that supports communities in coming together around shared challenges to imagine and co-create meaningful change. It emphasizes trust, adaptability, and collective creativity, placing relationships at the heart of the design process.

By fostering understanding and creating space for multiple perspectives, *Building Communities in Action* cultivates inclusive and generative spaces for shared learning and innovation. It moves beyond reliance on external "experts" and encourages collaborative processes rooted in lived experience, collective agency, and mutual responsibility. It supports transformative, community-led action that honors and embraces diverse knowledge systems (Leibowitz 2017).

This framework is especially valuable for addressing complex, systemic challenges, such as, climate change, social inequities, and fragmentation, where technical solutions alone are not sufficient. *Building Communities in Action* offers a pathway for educators, students, and communities to co-create regenerative responses and contribute to a more just and flourishing future (Camargo-Borges and Gergen 2022; Bodiford and Whitehouse 2020).

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5.2 Transformative Potential

> The future is ours—together—to create – Gergen Kenneth (2023)

The transformative power of *Building Communities in Action* lies in the interplay between *Know-Being* principles and *Know-How* practices:

- *Know-Being* principles foster relational awareness and enable engagement with real-world complexities while holding space for multiple perspectives throughout the process.
- *Know-How* practices provide adaptable tools to activate these principles, creating spaces for dialogue and shared journeys of co-creation.

Together, these principles and practices encourage the application of relational values with practical action to collectively address challenges and create pathways forward. They invite us to consistently ask during collaborative processes: "How are we relating?" and "What are we creating?"

5.2.1 Know-Being Principles

Each *Know-Being* principle serves as a resource for cultivating relational ways of working–fostering deeper connections, adaptability, and collective creativity (Bodiford and Camargo-Borges 2014).

- *Centering Collaborative and Relational Processes*:
- Focuses on collective intelligence and the power of collaboration to generate innovative ideas. Fostering meaningful connections and encouraging active engagement helps create opportunities for thriving through sharing commonalities, celebrating differences, and exploring new possibilities.
- *Engaging Organically and Dynamically*:
- Values the dynamic, ever-evolving nature of communities and teams as living systems. Balancing planning with flexibility allows participants to respond to what unfolds in the moment, nurturing creativity and openness to unexpected insights.
- *Recognizing Complexity and Multiplicity*:
- Acknowledges the importance of embracing differences and valuing diverse perspectives. Creating space for diverse voices and stories strengthens the group's capacity to approach challenges from multiple angles.
- *Focusing on What Is Useful*:
- Aligns efforts with practical needs and local realities, ensuring solutions are meaningful and actionable. Emphasizing relevance and context-sensitive impact helps build more sustainable responses.

5.3 Application of *Know-Being* Principles and *Know-How* Practices

Know-Being principles are made actionable through *Know-How* practices with design thinking phases of *Framing, Designing, Enacting*, and *Reflecting*. These phases guide teams and communities through a collaborative process to address challenges. Unlike linear approaches, this framework evolves based on the aspirations of participants, allowing for choice, adaptability, and emergence.

5.3.1 Framing

This phase sets the intention and aligns values for collaboration around a specific topic that is relevant and meaningful for the team or community. Framing invites curiosity and openness with methods like Appreciative Inquiry, which emphasizes possibilities and strengths. It involves small-group conversations to explore collective hopes, values, and areas of common ground. This means focusing on how people engage with one another and their environment.

5.3.1.1 Steps in Framing

- Frame powerful and affirmative questions and intentions to support generative dialogue that helps to explore new meaning and possibilities.
- Focus on collective hopes and values to create alignment.
- Explore diverse perspectives to build a deeper understanding.

5.3.1.2 Tips and Tools

- Form small groups (3–5 people) to ensure all voices are heard.
- Mix participants across ages, contexts, or roles for diversity.
- Use circles to encourage equity, openness, and deep and active listening.
- Focus on what connects in order to create common ground as well as what surprises or changes perspectives.
- Capture and share hopes and themes to guide the next phase.

5.3.1.3 Example Activity

In small groups, participants share something they are proud of and their hopes for collaboration. Groups record and share common and unique or surprising hopes, identifying themes to guide the process forward.

5.3.2 Designing

This phase involves generating possibilities based on the themes from Framing. Teams focus on strengths, challenges, and co-design opportunities that they can put into action together.

5.3.2.1 Steps in Designing

- Build on strengths and collective insights.
- Generate a range of possibilities for addressing challenges.

5.3.2.2 Tips and Tools

- Encourage strengths-based dialogue and collaborative support.
- Emphasize shared understandings of potential ways forward.
- Use diverse or similar groupings based on the activity's goals.
- Use visual aids like sticky notes, whiteboards, and natural elements to help inspire creativity.

5.3.2.3 Example Activity

Teams discuss their strengths, challenges, opportunities, and potential ideas. Each group presents their discussions, noting common themes and actionable ideas.

5.3.3 Enacting

This phase transforms insights from Designing into prototyping and action. It focuses on connecting ideas to tangible steps that can be implemented collaboratively.

5.3.3.1 Steps in Enacting

- Translate ideas into concrete actions.
- Emphasize flexibility and responsiveness to emerging dynamics.

5.3.3.2 Tips and Tools

- Guide participants to align existing efforts with new ideas.
- Use creative tools like storytelling or prototyping to bring abstract ideas to life. This helps to also foster collaboration and shared ownership.
- Discuss commitments, collaboration, and mutual support.

5.3.3.3 Example Activity

Teams identify how new ideas connect to current efforts. They outline specific actions to test these ideas, ensuring feasibility and positive impact.

5.3.4 Reflecting

Reflection creates regular and intentional pauses in the process to deepen understanding, refine approaches, and adapt to new insights. It is woven throughout the process to guide learning and alignment.

5.3.4.1 Steps in Reflecting

- Evaluate progress and refine plans based on emerging learning.
- Use reflections to align priorities, make shifts where needed, and deepen understanding.

5.3.4.2 Tips and Tools

- Create spaces for participants to share experiences and learnings.
- Active listening, paraphrasing, and reflective pauses ensure all voices are heard and allow ideas to deepen.
- Stay curious about differing perspectives and explore tensions.

5.3.4.3 Example Activity

At the beginning or end of each phase, teams reflect on their experiences, learning, and what adaptations are needed. Key questions include:

- What are we experiencing?
- What are we learning?
- What needs to shift or adapt?

5.4 Summary

Building Communities in Action is a dynamic, relational approach that integrates *Know-Being* principles and *Know-How* practices that center on collaboration, adaptability, and collective creativity. By fostering trust and embracing diverse perspectives, this framework empowers communities to co-create actionable, context-sensitive responses for meaningful and sustainable change (Table 5.1).

Table 5.1 Method overview

Main purpose
The intention for building communities in action is to: Create different levels of connections among people and their systems Integrate diverse skills, knowledge, interests, and experiences Co-design solutions that matter and that match the local challenges, context, and culture
Gained competences
Building communities in action invites us to focus more on processes and relations/interactions rather than content or final solutions. By doing so we strengthen our abilities to engage in: Co-creation: Integrating diverse skills, knowledge, interests, and experiences to develop meaningful solutions Collaborative reflexivity: Engaging reflexively and collaboratively across differences to generate new understandings and possibilities Curiosity positions: Welcoming and exploring multiple perspectives with a curious and open stance
Educational setting
Resources can be shared in formal educational settings and workshops. The beauty and the challenge is that there is no such thing as the right technique to follow. This methodology is action-oriented, experiential, and relational. That means it is process-focused and context-related. Each system is unique and the community is created in action. Aligned *Know-How* practices include methods like design thinking, appreciative inquiry, community-based participatory research, liberating structures, solutions/progress-focused methods, and other intentionally generative approaches. To learn more, facilitators may find Design Thinking and Social Construction: A Practical Guide to Innovation in Research by Celiane Camargo-Borges and Sheila McNamee useful. Also, for resources to deepen your understanding and support meaningful action, visit our Social Constructionist community: www.taosinstitute.net.
Space requirements/restrictions
Building Communities in Action invites us to come together in a space that has meaning and relevance to the people involved and the cultural context. We recommend space to move, to create groups, and to connect to the local environment.

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Table 5.1 (continued)

Resources and necessary materials
Suggested materials to support meaningful engagement and shared learning: Name tags—Help participants connect by using and practicing each other's preferred names Flip charts, sticky notes, markers—Use visual tools to organize, share, and connect ideas Food!—We create community around food. Consider especially sharing food from the local community Accessibility considerations—Ensure the space is welcoming and usable for all ages and abilities Time—Give time for conversations to unfold; give space for people to share their perspectives and what is important to them
Number of participants
The number of participants will depend on the local situation. What is most important to consider is the diversity of people involved to bring many perspectives to the process.
Facilitator competences and skills
The principles and practices we suggest for building communities in action invite us to all learn and unlearn ways of being together. Be mindful of inconsistencies. Align practices with principles Pay attention to our discomfort in trying new ways of co-creating solutions to challenges. Embrace it. It is often in these spaces of discomfort that we have our greatest learnings Avoid taking anything for granted: be open to new and different perspectives Craft questions before the meetings: curious questions, reflexive questions, and imaginative questions in order to expand meanings around the topic and to highlight different perspectives Hold your plans lightly. Make plans, but stay present and adapt to the needs of the moment and the people around you
Participants' skills/Age/Competences
There are no requirements for participants' skills, age, or competencies. Consider diversity of age, gender, role in the community, and cultural background, in order to expand understanding and create inclusion.
Duration
Building communities in action takes time and intentionality of developing relationships, trust, and commitment. The duration of time will depend on the history of relationships in the community and the intention for implementing co-created solutions.

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