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Book Review: Community development in action: putting Freire into practice

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Community Development in Action: Putting Freire into Practice

By Margaret Ledwith

Bristol, Policy Press, 2016.

189 pages

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This is Margaret Ledwith's fourth book on Community Development and is intended as a practical resource for today's community development practitioners.

Ledwith uses Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire's ideology of linking knowledge to action throughout the text, this naturally encourages a process of critical consideration and questioning. In keeping with this inclusive and empowering way of working, Ledwith begins her book with a wonderful glossary of words and terminology used widely in the social care field and regularly in social work practice. Terminology which at times could be said, to be used to divide and conquer, encouraging the gaps between education, theory and practice to become even wider, and preventing access to all - the very things which Ledwith is intent on preventing!

The glossary at the beginning, sets the tone of the book right from the onset, taking the pretention which is sometimes linked to 'knowledge', sharing new terminologies, allowing community development practitioners, to re-visit familiar and unfamiliar ground without any embarrassment. In sharing this knowledge, it demonstrates Ledwith's understanding of the power often held within language when expressing knowledge, the glossary diminishes the opportunity of language becoming the barrier which can often separate and divide communities. It also makes a powerful statement that we need to encourage and equip all activists with the ability to become familiar with the terms often used to describe us and also used to 'speak to' the 'powerful' in order counterbalance the centrifugal force of inequality, discrimination, racism and oppression present within our society in order for us to bring about change. Ledwith demonstrates inclusivity, making the accessibility of her work wide reaching, which is in harmony with Freire's theoretical vision.

A key strength is Ledwith's ability to unpack the complexity of theory, by steering the reader out of the danger of seeing theory and practice as divided silo's, by using the analogy of theory as a 'story telling'. This naturally combines both theory and practice together and together with Ledwith's knowledge of the historical perspective of community development work, links the struggles and successes of past and present together with true meaning.

Echoing the connection between theory and practice is illuminated wonderfully by the interjection of Ledwith's 'pause for thought' sections, which serve as useful reminders for the reader to touch base with practice and consider self-reflection. Asking us to consider practice, with examples of 'real' practice issues, proving the evidence and examples of further analysis and action which has been taken to effect change.

Ledwith considers the holistic impact of community development work with the inclusion of environmental justice alongside the ecosystem demonstrating the enormity of the range that community development work reaches at grassroots level.

In the chapter based on Paulo Freire's understanding of critical pedagogy, Ledwith brings us back to basics asking us to consider the foundations of Freire's commitment to equality and his fight against poverty and its impact on society; an example being children and their ability to learn when hungry. Drawing on comparisons which will resonate with practitioners on an international level, Ledwith discusses the theoretical concept which Freire describes as 'questioning' and the familiar process known to many social workers as 'reflection in action', as a tool that aids the comprehension of us understanding the life experiences of communities who are struggling to cope with life today.

Within the chapter which considers the critique of Freire and the anti-racist feminist movement, Ledwith consider the shortfalls of the Freirean standpoint whilst considering the differences and the similarities of Black Feminist and Feminist theory. Ledwith spends time in recognising the shortfalls and how the incorporation of such theoretical concepts; Feminism and Black Feminist theory, are essential components in the community development 'tool box' in order to understand the structural and political discrimination and oppression which works to silence diverse groups within diverse groups. Ledwith uses Identity Politics to inform us and guide the reader that they need to consider and acknowledge how critical questioning aids us in this process, an example used is the understanding that men's experiences may not be the same as women's even though they reside in the same community, and Black and White women cannot just be named as women, but have crucial differences and experiences of life.

Ledwith incorporates the theoretical concept of Intersectionality (Crenshaw: 1993) to explore this further and consider the additional layers of difference within each group and each individual must be noted, to ensure that practitioners comprehend the mutual construction of each different layer; disability, sexuality, race, identity in order to fully understand the experiences of the individuals and families we work with.

International Black Feminists such as Patricia Hill Collins and Bell Hooks, are included to provide the depth to Ledwith's points in to guiding us whilst at the same time provides the reader with the reassurance that her commitment to inclusivity is within her core and is the only way of having full critical understanding of the society in which we live.

As you weave your way through Ledwith's 'stories', they provide the warmth of familiarity to social work practitioners, students and activists acknowledging the links with and the passion for community development and activism. Providing informed lens' with which to view one's own practice and creating a vision with which will enable practitioners to create new 'stories' from one's own practice and journey in the activism of community development.

A refreshingly accessible, practical and comprehensive resource for social work students and practitioners and community activists which links beautifully with core social work values.

References:

Crenshaw, K. (1993), Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence against Women of Color, *Stanford Law Review* :Vol. 43, No. 6 (Jul., 1991), pp. 1241-1299
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