

A History of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute: Unintentionally Creating a Movement

By John McKnight

Co-Founder of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute

Senior Associate, Kettering Foundation

This paper could have several titles:

... “Can Blobs Multiply Without Becoming Squares?” (In the ABCD world we talk about circles and triangles rather than blobs and squares.)

... “Can Circles Proliferate Without Becoming Triangles?”

... “Where Do You End up if You Have No Map, But Make the Path by Walking it?”

... “How Do You Make Visible What is Invisible?” (Reverse magic)

The following reflection will give a brief introduction regarding the nature of ABCD and how it emerged. Of more relevance, we will reflect on how we have worked, our obstacles and what we have learned.

In 1969, Northwestern University was forming an urban research center. I had graduated from that University in 1949 with a bachelor’s degree. The University invited me to co-found their new research center even though my “post graduate” work had been in neighborhood organizing and civil rights activism.

On arrival I talked to the Center’s 24 academics about their research. It was very impressive, but it also offended me because their work exclusively focused on the needs, problems and dilemmas of people in neighborhoods. They showed no recognition of the capacities, strengths and achievements of the local people with whom I’d been associated for years. This “half empty” focus seemed unscientific to me. It would be like a physician who only knew about the lower half of the body. Therefore, I decided that it would be good if we did some research about neighborhood people and their capacities, civic achievements, problem solving abilities and creative inventions. In exploring the “full half” of neighborhood I thought we could learn what citizens can produce and what supported their productive work.

An incredibly creative community organizer, Jody Kretzmann, joined me as we began this research effort. Together, we took a four-year learning journey. We visited about twenty cities and, together with some graduate assistants, we talked to more than

2,000 neighborhood people. We would knock on doors and ask, “Can you tell us what people who live on this block or neighborhood have done together that made things better?” We collected hundreds of their stories and analyzed them in terms of what neighbors had used when they made things better.

Our basic finding was that people drew from five neighborhood resources no matter what the story was about. We called those resources assets and they were:

...The talents and capacities of the local residents

...Their voluntary clubs, groups and associations

...Their local institutions – for profit, not-for-profit, and government

...The land and other physical assets

...The process of exchange – sharing, bartering, trading, buying and selling

Based on this finding, we published a book called *Building Communities From the Inside Out: A Path Towards Finding and Mobilizing a Neighborhood's Assets*. The book describes what the five neighborhood assets are, shows how they can be identified and how they can be used through their connection.

After four years doing this research we were happy to be finished with the project and to have published the book. We were ready to go on to something else. However, a change came into our lives. Very quickly there was a huge demand for the book and an overwhelming request for us to make presentations, conduct consultations and do trainings. Because there were just two of us, we were turning down three or four groups every week. That seemed like a tremendous loss.

In the course of doing our research, and in our work before coming to the university, we knew a lot of neighborhood practitioners who knew how to work in the world of assets and the citizen¹ base of society.

We invited 24 of these people to join us at the University for several days. We shared with them the core findings of our research and it resonated with the work they were already doing. While only two of the attendees had a PhD, they decided to call

¹ Citizen is the name of a person who has the powers enabled by a democracy. A citizen is a person with the power to both create a vision and to join with other citizens to make it become real. It is unfortunate that for many it has come to mean a person's legal status in relationship to a government. In this paper, and in ABCD's work, we use “citizen” as an indicator of a person whose power enables democracy.

themselves the Faculty of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute. Since their formation, they have been the key actors in precipitating an international ABCD movement.

As we began, we shared some basic premises. First, that the center of our purpose is to enhance the power of citizens to be the producers of the future. Second, we can help people see that there are local community building assets that they may not recognize. Third, that the productive use of their assets depends on the connection of the local assets that are not connected. In addition, we came to see that there was a decision-making process in many neighborhoods that was unusually fruitful and usually unrecognized. It involved local residents asking three questions in this order:

1. Once we have identified all our neighborhood assets, how can we connect them in ways that will help us achieve our goals and become more powerful?
2. Now that we know what we can achieve with our own assets, what can we also do if some outside institutional support is added?
3. Once we know what we can do with our assets and the support of outside assets, we will know what we need that is outside of our resources.

Most institutions tend to start with the third question, which is identified through a “needs survey.” These “needs” are conditions that institutions claim to fix or remedy. Therefore, they are the principle producers of the outcome. In this process the citizen is at the edge of the undertaking and is actually disempowered.

In addition to the three questions, another way of defining an activity where citizens have the basic authority is when citizens decide what is to be done, how it will be done and who will join them in doing it. Here, we bow to the insight of Alexis de Tocqueville.

In the context of citizen authority, the response for institutions is not “Let us serve you” or “We can co-produce with you.” Rather, the response is, “How can you support us in ways that will enable us to be more powerful than we were when we started our relationship?”

So we began with these common premises. However, we had no plan. We were a Faculty of 24 and we called ourselves a Circle of Friends. We dispersed throughout North America and manifested our common ABCD premises in the domains where we acted.

In essence, ABCD happened because we did neighborhood research, summarized it in a workbook, experienced a tremendous demand for the book's orientation and we couldn't meet that demand. So, we recruited 24 local practitioners who called themselves a Faculty and ABCD emerged as we dispersed.

Today there are 125,000 of the Asset books that have been sold and many have been given away. The faculty has made thousands of contacts with groups throughout North America and ABCD is cited in more than 80 books. We have received hundreds of unsolicited letters saying that the asset-based idea has created a paradigm shift that has changed individual and organizational thinking about community. We have had four self-organized international conferences. By the time we held the second one, groups from 22 nations joined us. While we knew about eight of them, the other 14 were a surprise. They were self-organized and self defined. This made us realize that we had precipitated a movement with no intention, no plan, no system, no management, no money, no marketing.

So the question is, "How did 24 practitioners and two guys in an office end up with this worldwide citizen manifestation? How did that happen when they didn't create an organization, system or institution in the normal sense of the word? Looking back, there are at least three reasons why we didn't create an institution. Each has to do with the peculiarities of Jody Kretzmann and myself.

First, both of us hate management. We don't want to manage anything and we think of it as a method of moving away from community toward a technological society. Whenever management emerged as a possibility, we just didn't do it. We believed it was not a part of the path we were walking.

Second, we never coded our language. We always stuck to the vernacular, which was the language of the neighborhood where we worked. The mark of a professional is that they have a specialized coded language. However, people in the neighborhood know by stories while people in institutions know by studies and coded theories. Thus, our book and publications are in the vernacular, which frankly doesn't fit well with the language of a university. However, if we had chosen to communicate in the language of the university, we would have had very little influence locally and a movement would not have emerged.

We didn't want to make any money from what we were doing because citizenship isn't a market. It isn't the world of money that motivates citizens to do their work. The

money world is based upon scarcity and competition. The effective citizen world is based upon trust and collaboration.

Looking back, our peculiar dispositions are characteristic of movements rather than institutions. Movements can't be managed. Movements are always popular and use vernacular language. And nobody pays people to be in movements.

We have run into obstacles along the way. There were many, but three stand out: Funders, governments and universities. Funders usually wanted us to see things in terms of deficits and needs. They generally reward research that quantifies deficits. Governments were usually seeking to use asset-based citizen efforts for their own program purposes— not to enable or support more powerful citizens. Universities live in a world of numbers and coded language that serve other institutions well but does not serve neighborhoods well. Their method is the message.

There are at least three cultural obstacles. First is the intensive focus on leadership rather than “connectorship” Every neighborhood story we heard was not mainly about a leader. Rather, the core was associated citizens precipitating connections that weren't there before they acted. A science of “connectorship” needs to be created.

The second obstacle is the ever growing fear of the other manifested by so many people at the local, state and national level. Collective action is difficult when everyone is a potentially dangerous stranger.

The third cultural obstacle is the commodification of functions that once were performed by citizens in their communities. Today, many people believe that they can buy a good life. This consumer conviction is an obstacle to understanding that we have the capacity to make a good life.

Commitment to a leader, fear of the other and loss of the power and authority to solve problems and create the future is historically the seedbed for totalitarianism.

What did we learn in the last 25 years? First, we have tried to analyze why ABCD spread in a movement-like form. We are unsure, but our speculation is that it happened because, without thinking about it, our work was simple, doable and universal in its understanding of locality.

The second thing we've learned is that if you think of yourself as being amid a movement, you think differently than if you think of yourself as being part of an institutional entity. Movement thinking understands that you are surrounded by hundreds or thousands of citizens who are connecting in their neighborhoods around untold visions, interests, concerns and causes. The fact that you can't see them doesn't mean that they aren't there. When they begin to cohere and manifest their convictions together, they become visible and we call them a movement.

The third thing we've learned is that there is no substitute for face-to-face relationships if citizens are to achieve their goals in local places. A developing threat to this understanding is the idea that personal relationships between citizens can be replaced by computers and their proliferating manifestation. Face-to-face means that you are entering the world of the personal and intimate, which is exactly the opposite of the electronic world. Two people in contact electronically are literally out of "touch." They can't shake hands or feel whether you are trustworthy.

The fourth thing we have learned is the most wonderful of all. There is an enormous untapped base of citizens who have incredible capacities. We know that if you go to a block and ask residents just four questions –what are your gifts, skills, passions and knowledge that you are willing to teach, every single person can give you at least one response to each of the four questions. On average, they will give you three for each question². And over 90 percent will agree to share their capacities with neighbors and children on the block. This incredible pool of invisible citizen capacities is largely unused, to the great detriment to our current democracy.

Who is willing to call this talent forward? Which institution, what program, what funder? It is only the associational world that necessarily calls forth the local citizens' capacity and powers as the means for engagement. To understand how to make visible and support this amazing associational power may determine whether our democracy survives. ABCD has consistently endeavored to make visible the vital democratic center of America – its associations. As the great theorist of democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote, "In democratic countries, the science of associations is the mother of science; the progress of all the rest depends upon the progress (associations) have made."³

² See [Exemplary Materials for Designing a Community Building Initiative in a Neighborhood](https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/publications/publications-by-topic/Documents/Exemplary%20Materials%20%20Workbook(1).pdf)
[https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/publications/publications-by-topic/Documents/Exemplary%20Materials%20%20Workbook\(1\).pdf](https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/publications/publications-by-topic/Documents/Exemplary%20Materials%20%20Workbook(1).pdf)

³ Tocqueville, Alexis de (1945) Democracy in America. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. p. 118.

Today, many people have been institutionally blinded to the associational form of citizen power. It is largely invisible in the world of institutions, markets and media. However, it is this invisible world that has been the homeland of the people in the ABCD movement. We have been a part of a process that reveals the local power of a culture of contribution. Our work is about revealing, connecting and celebrating this invisible world where power is produced by citizens connected around their own vision.

Finally, a few words from Jody Kretzmann, my great colleague in initiating ABCD. He has recently experienced a stroke so his words are limited and yet profound. Speaking of walking the ABCD way, he said: "How would you be so you are aware of all the possibilities? Look for capacities in unexpected places. Be surprised. Welcome everyone. Invite them in. Move slowly and quietly. Be open to what's there and don't be looking for something that isn't there. Don't look through conceptual glasses like a scholar. Never be a boss. Toss the ball to others and assume they have the gifts to run with it. Remember that a story is a neighborhood way of knowing. Finally, respect everyone as being like you."