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The Community Tool Box: A Web-Based Resource for Building Healthier Communities

SYNOPSIS

Building healthier cities and communities requires an array of community-building skills that are not always taught in formal education. The Community Tool Box (<http://ctb.ukans.edu>) is an Internet-based resource for practical, comprehensive, accessible, and user-friendly information on community-building, which both professionals and ordinary citizens can use in everyday practice. It connects people, ideas, and resources, offering more than 200 how-to sections and more than 5,000 pages of text.

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In 1995, in the early days of the World Wide Web, we began work on an Internet-based resource for community change and improvement called the Community Tool Box (CTB). The CTB's mission is to promote community health and development by connecting people, ideas, and resources. We focused on developing practical information for community-building that both professionals and ordinary citizens could use in everyday practice—for example, material on leadership skills, program evaluation, and writing a grant application. The emphasis was on these core competencies of community-building, transcending categorical issues and concerns such as promoting child health, reducing violence, or creating job opportunities. We developed a broad table of contents and started writing, one section at a time. By mid-2000, there were more than 200 discrete how-to sections and more than 5,000 pages of text available on the CTB.

Audience. The audience, or end users, for this site include: (a) those doing the work of community change (community members and leaders), (b) those supporting community change (intermediary organizations such as public agencies or university-based centers), and (c) those funding community change (governmental institutions, foundations, and others). Use of the CTB grew nearly exponentially: more than 100,000 hits in 1997, more than 500,000 in 1998, and more than a million in 1999. Guest Book data confirm that users represent a wide variety of community-building settings and positions and come from all corners of the planet.

Attributes. Building healthier communities is hard work, requiring frequent adjustments for emerging opportunities and barriers. To be a resource for community work, a "tool box" requires several attributes. First, its content needs to be comprehensive. Since effective community members and practitioners need a variety of skills, sections of the tool box need to reflect a broad array of core competencies (for example, skills in conducting listening sessions, organizing focus groups, leading meetings, group facilitation, and recording). Second, the information needs to be easily available on demand and, in particular, readable, printable, and downloadable from one location. Third, the information must be useful, providing step-by-step guidance that the reader can apply directly in practice. Fourth, the tone of the material should be friendly and supportive of users who may lack sufficient knowledge or feel uncertain about what to do. Fifth, forums or exchange mechanisms should be available to connect people with relevant experience who can provide support for others in diverse contexts and situations. Sixth, an on-line resource should help reduce inequalities, or certainly not increase them. By being (nearly) universally available and free through the World Wide Web, our tools may help reduce inequities in local capacity for community change and improvement. Finally, since there is such high turnover among people and projects, the tools should help build capacity for continuous learning across the generations of those doing the work.

USING THE COMMUNITY TOOLBOX

Using the Community Tool Box is simple: by clicking on "Tools" on our home page, a reader moves immediately to a table of contents, which give access to labeled how-to sections (for example, a section on "Understanding and Describing the Community"). Arriving at any desired section, the reader will find:

- A clear and (hopefully) engaging description of the skill;
- Rationales or descriptions of consequences of using (or not using) the skill;
- A description of the conditions under which the skills should (or should not) be used;
- Descriptions of the discrete behaviors that constitute desired performance;
- Specific illustrations or stories about using the skill that reflect varied issues or concerns (for example, substance abuse, child and youth development, urban community development) and places or contexts (for example, urban, rural, specific ethnic or cultural communities);
- Resources, including other sources of information, contacts, and related websites;
- Checklists to help users remember important considerations and steps; and
- Summaries and other tools, such as large-type, ready-to-print summaries.

FRAMEWORK FOR THE CORE CONTENT

A conceptual framework, or model, for building healthier communities guides the choices of core content in the CTB. Based on earlier conceptual models,¹⁻⁴ this framework outlines a dynamic and iterative process with six phases, and related competencies, associated with facilitating community change and improvement. The six phases are.

- Understanding community context (for example, assessing community assets and needs);
- Collaborative planning (for example, developing a vision, mission, objectives, strategies, and action plans);
- Developing leadership and enhancing participation (for example, building relationships, recruiting participants);
- Community action and intervention (for example, designing interventions, advocacy);
- Evaluating community initiatives (for example, program evaluation, documentation of community and systems change); and
- Promoting and sustaining the initiative (for example, social marketing, obtaining grants).

The Figure gives examples of "how-to" sections in the CTB associated with each of these phases.

Both science-based practice and experiential knowledge inform choices for content development for the

Figure. CTB Framework for Building Healthier Communities

Core Competency	Some Related "How-To" Sections
Understanding Community Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understanding and describing the community Developing a plan for identifying local needs and resources Collecting information about the problem Defining and analyzing the problem Analyzing root causes of problems: the "But Why?" technique
Collaborative Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> VMOSA (vision, mission, objectives, strategies, action plans): an overview Proclaiming your dream: developing vision and mission statements Creating objectives Developing successful strategies: planning to win Developing an action plan Identifying strategies and tactics for reducing community health risks and enhancing protection Promoting coordination, cooperative agreements, and collaborative arrangements among agencies Developing multisector collaborations
Developing Leadership and Enhancing Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developing a plan for building leadership Becoming a servant leader Developing a plan for increasing participation in community action Identifying potential participants among diverse groups Methods of contacting potential participants Developing guidelines for staff hiring, orientation, and training Developing a plan for involving volunteers Providing supervision for staff and volunteers Conducting effective meetings
Community Action and Intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategies for community change and improvement: an overview Designing community interventions Adapting community interventions for different cultures and communities Developing a plan for advocacy Organizing study circles Registering voters Organizing a public demonstration
Evaluating Community Initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Our evaluation model: evaluating comprehensive community initiatives A framework for program evaluation Developing an evaluation plan Documenting and monitoring community and systems change Gathering and using community-level indicators Presenting evaluation information to a community audience
Promoting and Sustaining the Initiative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understanding social marketing: encouraging adoption and use of valued products and practices Working with the media Making community presentations Using principles of persuasion Creating a website Achieving and maintaining quality performance Developing a plan for financial sustainability Strategies for sustaining the initiative Applying for a grant: the general approach

CTB. Ongoing research by members of the CTB team,⁴ and many others throughout the world, suggests key factors or components of successful efforts to bring about community change and improvement (for example, leadership, having a targeted mission, action planning) and the related core competencies (for example, building leadership skills, creating a vision and mission, developing an action plan). Similarly, research and practice in behavioral instruction helped identify the structural elements of the how-to sections or learning modules.

ENHANCING ACCESS TO THE TOOLS

The CTB uses some traditional entry points or *gateways*, for example, a table of contents and a search mechanism relying on key words.

In addition, we use customized gateways to maximize efficient access. One type of gateway uses promising models or frameworks (for example, for a community health improvement process for program evaluation for writing a grant proposal) to guide the reader to core competencies related to each phase and operation of the framework (such as forming a coalition, identifying stakeholders, documenting the problem).

Another valued gateway is the Troubleshooting Guide. This access point starts with a list of about 20 problems or challenges commonly faced in the work of community change and improvement. By clicking on a particular problem situation (for example, "We haven't had enough community action"), the reader calls up a list of clarifying questions (such as "Does the group know the specific changes we want to see made?"; "Do we have enough members to carry out our actions?"). If the answer to any question is "No," the user may click again to retrieve related how-to information. Since we may be more open to learning new skills when facing a challenge, the Troubleshooting Guide provides valued user-tailored access to the tools.

SOME USES AND APPLICATIONS

The CTB has been used for several specific purposes. First, the learning modules are being used extensively in

providing training and technical assistance. For example, our University of Kansas Work Group has used the tools in periodic workshops and ongoing consultation with a variety of community-based initiatives, including groups addressing categorical issues such as adolescent pregnancy or substance abuse, and broader issues such as youth development, rural health, or urban community development. Second, material from the CTB has been used as readings for both traditional and distance learning courses. For example, a University of Kansas distance learning course on building healthy communities used compressed video and CTB materials to create distributed learning communities among teams of both traditional students and community members and practitioners in regional sites throughout Kansas. A third application has been to help build the capacity of funded community-building initiatives. We are working with grantmakers and the community partnerships they support to enhance core competencies among large numbers of community members and practitioners engaged in this work.

More generally, these tools are being used to support the community work of a great variety of people in diverse contexts throughout the world. The entries in the CTB "Guest Book" suggest that users range from students in high school civics classes to older adults working on elder issues. They include community members, leaders, and professionals working in public health, child and youth development, environmental justice, education, mental health, social welfare, self-help, international development, policy advocacy, rural development, and urban community development.

SOME CHALLENGES AND STRENGTHS

Several challenges must be addressed to enhance the CTB's usefulness. First, we need to continue to extend the breadth, depth, and generality of the core content. By partnering with others with technical and experiential knowledge, we hope to increase the number of how-to sections to 400 or more, enhance the depth of how-to information, examples, stories, and tools, and broaden

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the focus to different, cultures and contexts. Second, we need to enhance the interactivity of the CTB. For example, we plan to make greater use of online forums to connect those with complementary knowledge and experience. We are also building tailored gateways, (for example, a "work bench" for preparing a grant application). Finally, we would like to see wider use of the CTB in community practice. Social marketing efforts include links to related sites, brochures, direct electronic mailing to current and prospective users, and partnering with state, national, and global initiatives for community health and development.

Several strengths of the CTB suggest the value of further development and wider use. First, the CTB is becoming an extraordinary resource for teaching and learning. It offers massive amounts of information to support the development of core competencies in building healthier communities. Second, it allows input and sharing from the field about promising practice models. By linking with a growing community of change agents, the CTB can help filter and communicate innovations emerging from the diverse but related work of community change and improvement. Finally, the Internet-based CTB provides a powerful engine for diffusion of practical information.

By partnering with state, national and global networks, we can promote widespread adoption, adaptation, and use of tools for community transformation.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

Communications technologies can be used to help create a civic ecology—an environment in which local people routinely work together to effect the conditions and out-

comes that matter to them. This will demand a support infrastructure for "going to scale"—for making civic work easier and more rewarding for large numbers of people in many different communities. New communications technologies such as this Internet-based "community tool box" can be used to support community change efforts in millions of local contexts.

Imagine a grand exchange network that connects a diverse community of people engaged in transformational work. For example, online forums might join people addressing specific issues, perhaps helping reveal the underlying social determinants of related concerns. Forums could be used to connect people with diverse experience, for example, novices and veterans or those with histories of discrimination and those with power. A network could also help join those who work in different places and cultural contexts. New communications technologies can help connect people both locally and globally.

Building healthier cities and communities fits with global trends of self-determination and democracy-building. The widespread (and growing) availability of Internet-based resources such as the CTB offers a flexible and efficient way to give voice to local concerns and innovations, connect people in common purpose, and provide tools for local work.⁵ These innovations transcend distance in promoting democratic social relations across communities of place and interest.⁶ Imagine universal, affordable access to tools for community-building and transformation in local libraries, places of worship, cafés, and public buildings. In this new civic ecology, we can join together in common purpose across space and time, furthering the work of democracy and reducing the inequities that hinder the pursuit of justice.

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