

Book review

Learning by Doing

Community-led change in Aotearoa NZ

Category: Book Reviews / Non-fiction

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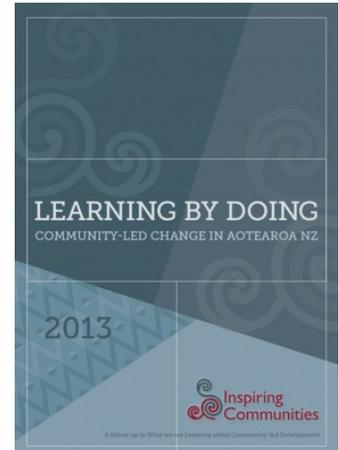
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Audience: For Mental Health Workforce, For Community

Summary: Report outlining the latest thinking, learning, examples and results from community-led activity



Learning by Doing unpacks what authors refer to as Community-Led Change (CLC) and Community-Led Development (CLD) in this country. Inspiring Communities, who produced the report, is a charitable trust funded by a four-year grant from the Tindall Foundation. *Learning by Doing* is essentially a summary of their findings 2008–2012.

Nine organisations practicing a broad range of CLC interpretations were tracked across the four-year period and feature in case studies scattered throughout the book and then expanded upon in the appendices. These case studies are the doing the report's title refers to.

New terms unknown to many

I read this document as someone who has been involved with a lot of doing in Christchurch in the post-quake environment. My experience in community development has been predominantly limited to the last four years with my organisation, so I do not profess to be an expert in the field, but realise I have a valid interpretation of *Learning by Doing*.

CLD or CLC are not terms that I have as yet used day-to-day, but after reading I can see that it's part of what we do. There must be many, many people out there doing this work who may not be aware that it is referred to in this way.

Very North Island-centric

I did notice that there is very little reference to Christchurch and the quakes in the report. Admittedly, the work was underway before the quakes but only minimal references have been made throughout. Perhaps this was out of sensitivity and a desire to give the quake-torn city some space before rushing in to analyse it or bother struggling organisations. But I do feel the need to venture a critique that *Learning by Doing* is very North Island-centric.

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Place, process, reflections and lessons

The report takes a step-by-step approach across place, process (engagement, leadership, activation/sustenance) and finally, reflections and lessons.

Within the first part of the report, the role of place and the importance of good facilitation in making things happen are considered as well as new models of governance. The involvement of tangata whenua and the resulting culturally-driven considerations are unpacked with some depth. Community resilience is given consideration and this is where Christchurch's situation is discussed, albeit briefly.

Impact on the community

In my view, the most important section of the report is chapter six where the authors reflect on the impact this sort of activity is having in the community and its associated challenges.

They acknowledge that CLC is an iterative process often done on the fly. They muse that the best place for CLD practices to have impact is with neighbourhoods, small towns or suburban groups.

The authors reflect on the Inspiring Communities team's learning that CLC groups sometimes lack the desire, often motivated by a lack of time, to run adequate reflective processes when undertaking their work. Inspiring Communities, noticing this lack, then supported their nine case-study organisations to do a greater amount of reflection during the time in which this project was taking place.

Journey more important than destination

Furthermore, I found it pleasing and a relief to read (as it concurred with my own experience) that the Inspiring Communities team recognised how important the process was in CLC and as such, how often the impacts it may have are in fact difficult to see or pinpoint physically.

The process or the journey can be more important than what you get at the other end. Networks, new ways of thinking, community connectedness, desires and priority shifts are difficult to see but they are still outcomes.

Many funders and government bodies are often product- or outcome-oriented and one would hope this report can help to increase awareness about different ways of working here. A broader understanding of good outcomes in CLD and an acceptance of its inherent messiness or complexity would be a good outcome from this report.

Permission to empower change

Something that I reflected on as I read this report was that I felt it is almost trying to give people permission to undertake or support/empower community-led change. It's a sad indictment on New Zealand society this sort of thing still needs to be legitimised.

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It says a lot about how pervasive our permit culture is, created as a result of over-bureaucratisation and risk-aversion. On page 94, the report talks about the need to regenerate the Kiwi 'can-do' spirit; that Number 8 Wire mentality we love to claim when we do things well. We've had a wonderful run of that in Christchurch post-quake, just getting on and doing things without waiting for permission.

For the next version of *Learning by Doing*, perhaps if there is a follow-up, I'd like to see lessons from Christchurch shared more widely with the rest of the country. In a post-disaster situation the normal way of working gets discarded and people get on and do things out of necessity.

The big challenge is not reverting back to old ways if, in fact, new ways are working better! How do we take the good lessons forward for long-term change both here and elsewhere?

Review by Coralie Winn, Director and Co-Founder of urban regeneration initiative, Gap Filler in Christchurch

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