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Theoretical Foundations

Responsible Planning for Continuing Education in the Health Professions

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Abstract: *This article proposes a theory of program planning for continuing education that takes power and interests as central to action and asks what educators can do to plan responsibly. Program planning is defined as a social activity in which educators negotiate interests in social and organizational contexts structured by power relationships. We explain four central concepts on which the theory is based: power, interests, responsibility, and negotiation. By tying these four concepts together, the theory urges planners to nurture a substantively democratic planning process in the face of power relations that either support or threaten this vision. The article concludes with a discussion of what continuing educators need to know to plan programs responsibly.*

Key Words: Continuing education, interests, negotiation, power, program planning, responsibility

What do people actually do when planning continuing education (CE) programs? And what really matters as they go about this activity? Invariably, educators are counseled to follow the familiar four-step process of identifying needs, developing objectives, selecting learning activities, and evaluating the achievement of the objectives.[1,2] Even as the field has been urged to move from a content-centered approach to learner-centered and patient-centered approaches,[3-5] the models are presented in the familiar vocabulary of the four-step systematic planning process. The structure of these models is usually buttressed by a claim that educational planning is supposed to be done just as the "medical model for patient care, which includes diagnosis, treatment planning, treatment implementation, and follow-up"[6] (p. 134). Most of these planning theories see continuing educators as problem solvers applying these four steps in practice; the social and organizational contexts in which planning occurs are seen as "noise" that impedes the application of the principles, just as patients' noncompliance is seen as "noise" in the medical model of treatment. The planning literature has repeated this four-step structure for so long and has used it to form the structure for every single accreditation system for CE in the health professions that most people see it as the sine qua non of good program planning. Although the importance of contextual factors has been recognized by many authors who write about program planning in CE for health professionals,[4,7,8] these factors have rarely been taken as a source of insight for theories of program planning.

Continuing educators who plan educational programs claim that, far from being noise, the context always matters as they attempt to plan responsibly.[9] In this paper, we argue that whenever continuing educators plan programs they engage in a social activity of negotiating personal and organizational interests in complex organizations that are marked by historically developing and structurally organized power relations.[10,11] The resulting educational programs are constructed by the judgments that real people make in this messy everyday world. Because real people make real judgments in this complex environment, two central issues must be addressed by any program planning theory. First, whenever people act in a social context, they do so within sets of power relations. Regardless of whether these political relationships are marked by consensus or conflict,

every experienced planner knows that the politics of the situation always matter. This leads to the second question that any theory must address: If people always plan in the face of power, to whom are they responsible for the CE program they construct? Is it professionals who participate in the program, the leadership of the hospital sponsoring the program, the faculty who teach in the program, or the patients who will ultimately be affected by what the professionals learn? Importantly, which of these people can legitimately decide on the program's purpose, content, and format? Few people responsible for CE for health professionals would deny the importance of these questions. Indeed, they would claim that any account of program planning must address these two issues in order to be of practical help in the everyday world. The purpose of this article, then, is to describe a model that accounts for people acting within socially structured and historically developing contexts to plan educational programs for health professionals.

Four Concepts for Planning Continuing Education

Conventional planning theories are unable to represent the central dimensions of the social practice of planning programs for health care professionals. In response to this problem we argue that planning practice is a social process of negotiating personal and organizational interests in contexts of structured power relations. In this section we develop four central concepts that can account for the world that planners experience: power, interests, responsibility, and negotiation. We argue that people's *interests* are causally related to the kinds of educational programs that are constructed. The central *responsibility* of planners' practice, thus, is to work out whose interests will be represented in the planning process. This work is always carried out in contexts that are marked by *power relationships* that will constrain or enable responsible planning. We argue, therefore, that *negotiation* is the characteristic activity of program planning practice. This activity always has two outcomes: planners *construct* educational programs and, through their practices, they *reconstruct*, either maintaining or transforming the power relations and interests that make planning possible.

Power Relations Frame the Contexts where Planning Happens

Beyond rather unspecified injunctions to analyze the organizational context, most planning theories are remarkably silent on how planners are to act within their contexts. Our starting point is that planning practice, like any other human interaction, must be seen within "the enduring social relationships"[12] (p. 51) that support or constrain planners' actions. Giddens argues that power, the socially structured capacity to act, is a central feature of these social relationships: "action only exists when an agent has the capability of intervening, or refraining from intervening, in a series of events so as to be able to influence their course[13] (p. 256). Although action is the result of human intention, the ability to act is structurally distributed. In this view, power is the capacity to act, distributed to individual planners by virtue of the organizational and social positions that they occupy.[12] Importantly, however, this socially structured capacity may or may not be exercised on any particular occasion. This distinction is crucial, because it provides a basis for integrating planners' action within their organizational context. It does this by placing planners' action at the center of power, as the exercise of power; it also places power at the center of planners' action as the property that makes action possible. By arguing that planners must act in a social world structured by historically developing sets of power relations, the theory begins to meet the challenges faced by continuing educators in the contexts where they plan.

Interests Are Causally Related to Continuing Education Programs

Our argument is that educational programs are causally related to the exercise of power in relation

to people's interests. That educational programs are causally related to these interests is no superfluous claim, for we must ask: If programs did not depend on people's interests, upon what would they depend? Perhaps more importantly, if programs were not causally related to people's interests, why would it matter *which* educational programs were constructed? Educational programs matter because they are statements of how the world should be different and people's interests determine their important features. Interests, which direct the actions of all people in the planning process, are complex sets of "predispositions, embracing goals, values, desires, expectations, and other orientations and expectations that lead a person to act in one direction or another[14] (p. 41). Interests, then, are the motivations and purposes that lead people to act in certain ways rather than others when confronted with situations in which they must make a judgment about what to do or say. It is important to see that there is no necessary connection between planners' specific interests and the power distributed to them by virtue of their place in a social or organizational setting. Interests are, however, centrally involved in the exercise of power. All those involved in planning a program exercise their power in accordance with their own concrete interests. In other words, all educational programs are *causally related* to the specific interests of the people who planned them. Of course, to say that programs are causally related to concrete interests does not mean that a program is utterly predetermined because, as pointed out in the previous section, the exercise of power is always contingent. Our point is that power relations structure the terrain in which people must act and their interests are their motivations for acting on that terrain.

Planners Are Responsible for Negotiating Interests

All planners know they are not free agents able to translate their interests directly into the purposes, content, and format of a program. Rather, their planning is always conducted within a complex set of personal and organizational power relations among people who may have similar, different, or conflicting sets of interests regarding the program. Planners' responsibility, therefore, the central problem of their practice, centers on how to negotiate the interests of these people to construct a program. We take responsibility as being able "to answer for one's conduct or obligation, [to be] politically answerable" (*Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, 1976). The problem is to answer this question in every concrete planning activity: To whom is the continuing educator ethically and politically answerable? Or stated differently, whose interests will be negotiated in what ways in constructing educational programs? In continuing medical education (CME), for example, whether patients should be involved in the planning process emerges as a significant question. Likewise, with so much attention currently being given to health policy and outcomes of care, who represents the interests of patients becomes a significant issue for CE of health professionals.

If the actual form and content of programs depend on the interests of those who construct them, then the central ethical question becomes whose interests are to be represented and the central political question becomes how will those interests be represented. In this view, all planning practice takes an ethical stance about whose interests matter and then depends on political skills to legitimately negotiate these interests. To answer these ethical questions in practice requires a specific vision or belief system. For if a planning theory is to be instructive for the real judgments that planners routinely make in negotiating interests, it must be rooted in a particular set of ethics that is not based solely on what works for those who have the most power. The normative base of our theory rests on the belief that continuing educators should have an interest in nurturing a substantively democratic planning process. This belief makes our planning theory instructive for practice by providing the basis for its ethical dimension. In a very real sense, this interest in democratizing planning is the vision of how educational programs

should be constructed. Without this vision for planning, the educational programs developed by continuing educators would always be shaped by the interests of those with the most power.

Because interests are chronically negotiated in planning, our vision of democratic planning means that all people who are affected by a program should "be involved in the deliberation of what is important"[15] (p. 11). As Frankel says of Dewey's democratic educational vision, "Democracy is a procedure for melding and balancing human interests"[16] (p. 20). Thus a *democratizing planning process* means simply that real choices will be put before people about what collective action to take in constructing the program. By arguing for a democratizing process as the ethical principle for negotiating interests, we explicitly align our theory with a particular intellectual and practical tradition in American education. This tradition stretches from Dewey's efforts to develop democratic forms of education to more recent attempts to reinterpret and extend this work in a way that recognizes the threats to democratic education posed by its enactment in the asymmetrical power relations of the social, cultural, political, and economic systems of North-American life.[17,18] It is important to show that planners have an interest in a democratizing planning process because it has been developed and validated by the society in which they live. If CE is to have a positive and productive relation to the ongoing creation of the social, cultural, political, and economic systems of American life, it must abide by the same ideal as the larger society. As Apple points out, "Democracy is not a slogan to be called upon when the 'real business' of our society is over, but a constitutive principle that must be integrated into all of our daily lives"[17] (p. xvi).

Although the strategic vision for planning should be that all people affected by the program have the right to participate in constructing it, knowing which people should be involved and how to create conditions for their substantive involvement is almost always an uncertain, ambiguous, and risk-taking activity. No theory can unambiguously prescribe whether the actual people selected to construct a program are, in some transcendental sense, the right people. Rather, the planner must make a practical judgment in each and every situation. In light of this, we suggest a scheme for recognizing whose interests are at stake in any educational program. Expanding on the work of others,[19] we believe there are five groups of people whose interests always matter in planning programs: learners, teachers, planners, institutional leadership, and the affected public. Indeed, the interests of these five groups of people are *always* negotiated. The crucial practical issues are who actually represents their interests, are they legitimate representatives, and are they the best representatives available given the specific circumstances.

Negotiation Is the Characteristic Activity of Program Planning

So far, we have characterized the social components of planning. Next, we need to account for the action dimensions of practice. In order to make the direct connection between the acting planner and the organizational context, we argue that negotiation is the central form of action that planners undertake in planning programs. Planners always negotiate in two dimensions simultaneously. First, and most obviously, their actions construct an educational program. For this, we draw upon the conventional usage of negotiation, which is defined in *Webster's New World Dictionary* (1976) as "to confer, bargain, or discuss with a view to reaching agreement" with others. Within this conventional usage, we can say that planners always *negotiate with* their own specific interests and power and *negotiate between* the interests of other people in any planning process. Planners not only bring their own interests to the planning process (negotiate with), but they must constantly negotiate between others' interests to construct the educational program. Second, and at a more fundamental and encompassing level, planners also *negotiate* the interests and power relations

themselves. People's interests and power relations are not static, but are continually being acted upon by the negotiation practices themselves. This means that not only do planners negotiate with and between interests, they also *negotiate about* the power relations and interests. Planners' actions, although directed toward constructing educational programs, are also always reconstructing the power relations and interests of everyone involved (or not involved) in the planning process. We are arguing that power relations and interests always both structure planner action (negotiation) and are reconstructed by these same practices. In sum, planners both *act in* and *act on* their social contexts when planning a program.

As planners act, they can expect to construct the visible educational program that will affect the world in a certain way and reconstruct, less visibly, power relations and interests in regard to "knowledge (who knows what), consent (who exercises power and who obeys), trust (who cooperates with whom), and the formulation of problems (who focuses on or neglects which problems)"[20] (p. 80). Most program planners recognize that reconstructing power relations and interests is as important an outcome as the program itself. Planning practice always operates in these two dimensions, which are seamlessly connected, because planners cannot operate outside the social and political relationships among the people involved in the planning. Even when planners are dealing with technical matters, such as which facility to use, how to design a survey, or how much money to charge participants, the judgments in these areas are structured by the social and political relationships of the people who make them. Thus, acting-in-context to construct an educational program is not possible without acting-on-context in terms of who can make the judgments necessary to construct the program (which is why program planning is more than just following the familiar steps and procedures). Our central claim is that planning practice, as embodied in the activity of negotiating interests, is as much an action on the world in terms of reconstructing social and political relationships as the educational program is an action in it. We hasten to add that while the impact on power relations and interest may be less visible, it is no less important. Previous research[10] shows that experienced planners understand that their practice has two outcomes and actively work toward both.

Guidelines for Responsible Planning

So what do continuing educators need to know in order to plan responsibly in the everyday world? As the people responsible for negotiating about interests, educational planners need three kinds of knowledge and skills. These are to be technically competent, to be political and plan responsibly, and to represent interests democratically.

Technical Competence

Continuing educators will not get far without knowing, for example, how to construct a valid survey, organize and manage a planning meeting, develop an appropriate mailing list and get the publicity out on time, be aware of the variety of instructional techniques that can be used, find and select good instructors, select facilities appropriate to the instructional format, and prepare a credible budget. Planners need to know the features of any program that must be negotiated (such as content, format, and audience), when they must be negotiated, and what kinds of information will be needed to make responsible judgments in these areas. Without these skills, or access to them through other people on staff, planners are likely to be seen as well-meaning people with nothing to offer.

Political Awareness and Skill

Although technical skills are necessary, they are not sufficient for negotiating responsibly. Planners also need political skill in order to get things done

with people in the organizational context in which they work. For example, they need to be able to work with other people and develop their trust and respect, understand the formal and informal power structure of the organization, and know which strategies will, and will not, work in their associations. Without this knowledge, planning simply could not occur in anything resembling a responsible fashion, because the planner would be overwhelmed by the politics of the situation. The planner needs organizational savvy and diplomatic skills to recognize which people can, and must, represent the various interests to give the program credibility with its audience. To be responsible, planners must be political, which means they must anticipate how power relationships will affect their negotiation of interests in planning programs.

Democratic Representation of Interests

Technical and political knowledge alone, however, will not tell educators what is truly at stake as they plan programs. Planners must be ethically sensitive to the fundamental link between the people whose interests are represented and the central features of the program. In other words, who is involved in the planning will determine what the purpose, content, and format will be. Ultimately, continuing educators, in building the program, have to take a stand about who will represent which interests. Because planners have to decide who will represent which interests, they need to know the ways in which power relationships strengthen certain interests and silence others. Planners need to have their antennae up in order to gauge people's commitments to democratic planning, because there will always be pockets of support for this approach even where those with the most power reject it. Part of the planner's ethics is knowing how to read these commitments and use them to build a substantively democratic planning process.

After all is said and done, why does your work as a continuing educator matter? Our answer is that the programs you develop will make the world a different place. After all, people with particular sets of interests will have planned the programs. They will have selected certain purposes, content, audiences, and formats, thereby closing off other possibilities. Each program you develop makes a statement about the way the world ought to be. This is not a startling revelation; all other systems constructed by people with particular interests, including professional schools, are based on a set of beliefs about the way the world ought to be organized. Simply put, CE cannot be a neutral activity; if it were, why would anyone care about it? Therein lies our central responsibility as educators — namely, what kind of world will our programs shape?

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