

REFRAMING COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS IN EDUCATION

UNITING THE POWER OF PLACE
AND WISDOM OF PEOPLE

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Christopher Janson, and Matthew Militello



Reframing Community Partnerships in Education

Reframing Community Partnerships in Education provides both the theoretical framework as well as a practical guide to engage educators in interdisciplinary, inter-organizational, multicultural, and multi-generational work to improve the social fabric of communities. Using case examples of best practice, this book explores transformational practices for community development, community building, and civic engagement. Featuring “Community Learning Exchange” pedagogies adaptable to a wide range of contexts, this book encourages educators—through use of participatory practices and a collective leadership model—to build stronger communities and advance learning for all.

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CHAPTER 2: MEANING MAKING, AXIOMS, AND ECOLOGIES FOR ENGAGEMENT

We come to this work acknowledging the power of place and the wisdom of people; we are educators, activist academics, and parents. We bring our experiences and remember the spirit of our childhood. This spirit includes the view that play is children's work and is at the heart of how we engage, activate, and build relationships that then nourish our individual and collective development. Fun is at the core of engagement and engagement is a core value of the CLE work highlighted in this text. We have lived the reality that when people are invited to share their story as they author themselves, their wisdom radiates with excitement in a public way. Certainly the intensity and complexity of our realities vary, but the building elements of learning and teaching in public remain the same. This public and collective learning yields a power that is inviting and contagious.

Importance of Meaning-Making

At the CLE, we are deliberate about how we inform and navigate the learning and meaning-making process. Emerging from our understanding that relationships are central to our work through the CLE, we begin from the shared belief and conception that the learning process is first and foremost social. We manage this stage by inviting teams to participate in a CLE. We deviate from the individual framing of this learning experience because we are deliberate about maximizing the social aspect of the learning experiences. When attending an event as a team, we also maximize the opportunity for conversation, reflection, and exploration. This is a benefit of the collective leadership process. Vygotsky tells us that we experience an event twice, first socially and then cognitively. As we scaffold the meaning-making process at the CLE, we add to this experience by expanding the social aspects of learning by designing and engaging in a

dynamic, generative learning experience. It is through the relationships being developed that the cognitive experience of co-constructing knowledge occurs. This social and cognitive learning process is informed by opportunities to story the experiences, reflect upon the experience, re-author or re-narrative the experience and, finally, act on the experience. It is within this final, crucial component of the learning experience that the technical aspects concerning *how* we act upon ourselves, our families, our organizations, our institutions, and our communities begin to take form. This, too, is a deeply collaborative process in which the approaches, strategies, and solutions that arise from the individual, idiosyncratic imaginations and contexts of the participants are shared, in order to form a composite set of robust options and opportunities that these individual teams can then take back with them and enact within themselves, their organizations, and their communities.

When convening a CLE, participants bring their stories, experiences, questions, and passions to the gathering. The CLE uses the organic elements of our guiding axioms and transfers them to a place of hosting. Through the collective process of bringing these axioms to life, the CLE becomes a process for convening diverse groups of people and ideas across traditional and artificial boundaries including places, cultures, ages, and realities. The meaning-making process of a CLE begins well before teams of participants show up to the CLE. The planning process is collaborative, generative, and dialogical. The process, from beginning to end and beyond (i.e., debriefing of the engagement experience and implementation of action plans), is deliberate and designed to continuously nurture conversations intended to help participants explore, change, and grow. This engagement process – or pedagogy, if you will – is effective when we help develop a schema for participants to organize conversations conceptually, name experiences, make meaning of these experiences, and act upon them. We use the axioms of the

CLE below to nurture this process and inform the learning. We acknowledge the CLE process described above departs from the traditional educational experiences many of us have lived in public institutions. However, it is this critically important departure that allows for the organic experiences of the CLE to be brought to life.

Axioms that Guide the Work

At the core of the work are five axioms. We believe these concepts to be truths that form the core of the CLE values system. We use these *axioms* here in purposeful ways. The axioms frame the beginning of the work, and they also become evident through experiencing a CLE. Borrowing its meaning within its uses in modern logic, an axiom can be thought of *as a beginning* or starting point. The work of the CLE begins with these guiding values. However, our use of the axioms also transcends the calculating constraints of modern logic that would limit them as simply the beginning of the work of the CLE.

Instead, we reach for a deeper meaning of axioms used by philosophers in ancient Greece. For them and for us, an axiom is a truth without any need for proof in the form of linear, logic. For us, these *axioms are established by means of real, lived experiences*. When friends, family, and other community members want to learn about the CLE, we can describe the process and we can share these axioms, but it is only through experiencing a CLE that these axioms first become true and real.

The core values represented by these axioms permeate boundaries while guiding thought, practice, and relationships. They are always at work in a circular, non-linear way. The CLE work is neither a project nor an isolated event—*it is a way of life*. The rest of this chapter is the scaffolding to the meaning-making process we employ at the CLE. We seek here to help the

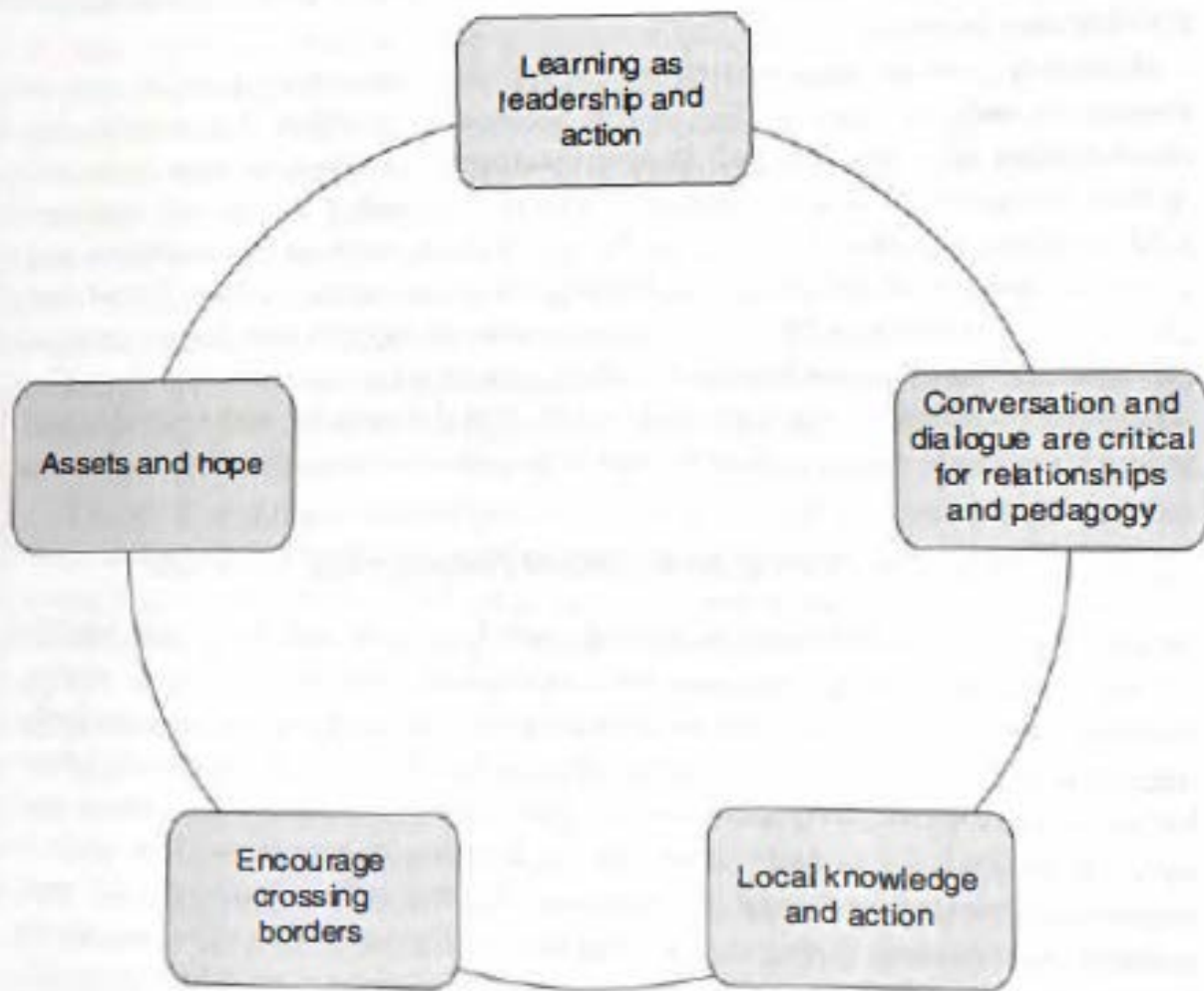


FIGURE 2.1 CLE axioms

reader make the best sense of this social innovation and the life that emerges when at work within a CLE, in absence of having yet truly experienced it.

See FIGURE 2.1: CLE Axioms

In our attempt to approximate the experience of the CLE, we use stories in this book to reveal how these axioms can be a guiding force, a way of life. While living by these axioms does not always guarantee success, it does provide an opportunity to expand our understanding of the world in a dignified way. A working understanding and acceptance of this way of living yields an opportunity to notice events, conversations, and invitations we have not noticed before developing this awareness. Additionally, a working understanding and acceptance of this way of living also yields the consciousness and spirit needed to design and nurture the work of the CLE, for others to experience first so that they can live it too.

Learning and Leadership are a Dynamic Social Process

Organizers of the CLE believe that learning is a leadership act, and that leadership is at its best when it is in action. This duality informs the dynamic nature of the pedagogical process. All participants have something to contribute, and they are active in framing their learning. This includes the stories they exchange, the conversations they share, the questions they frame, and the action plans they construct for themselves, their organizations, and their community. We see shared learning as the foundational action for the development and sustainability of human beings and the improvement of their social, economic, and political condition.

Learning how to learn within the context of relationships is at the core of leadership and the construction of the necessary conditions that nurture this development in an inviting and dignified manner. Learning emerging from, and within, relationships is supported and nurtured through a number of signature CLE pedagogies, and is limited only by the distinct needs of the

collective and the imaginations of the designers. Among the pedagogies, we have found that play provides distinct and powerful opportunities to support the development of relationships that transcend gender, culture, and generations. Not only does play allow us to connect to our universal “child” and the wonder and enthusiasm of seeing things with fresh eyes, it does so in democratizing ways.

Conversations are Critical and Central Pedagogical Processes

At the core of social learning theory is the need to create safe spaces and healthy relationships for participants, learners, and teachers alike to share their stories. Relationships are the first point of contact in the learning process, and storytelling and conversation are the mediating tools. If the climate, spirit, and interaction between participants, facilitator, and/or their environment are not inviting and safe, it is difficult for sustainable and public learning to take place. This Gracious Space is critically important for honest conversation and storytelling. It is this space that allows CLE participants to trust that their story has value and their story will be respected. This Gracious Space does not mean that a critical point of view is not presented; indeed, it is this relational space that invites the storytelling process and authentic, sometimes challenging conversation to take place.

The building blocks of CLE pedagogy are safe space, storytelling, conversations, and relationships. This foundation of engagement helps participants develop and move to finding or building their voice toward action. Our challenge is to help co-create space to explore, imagine and create alternative realities within the familiar. It is through our relationships with others that we change, grow, and develop. CLE pedagogies are designed to maximize opportunity and encouragement in order to build new relationships and nurture existing ones. Along with storytelling and conversations, there is an art to how we frame questions before, during, and after

the CLE. Questions are used to encourage participants to see hidden personal strengths, to understand new possibilities, and to discover previously buried assets. Taken in full, conversations using questions and stories purposefully to support participant development and greater understanding of their situations within their home communities can yield healthy change.

The People Closest to the Issues are Best Situated to Discover Answers to Local Concerns

As the CLE organizes around a certain topic, participants are invited and expected to engage with each other through sharing their individual and community stories and experiences around the CLE topic. Such engagement fosters a creative agency that helps people find their power and voice, and the process responds to the need for local communities to own their destiny, though not in an individualistic manner. On the contrary, theirs is a collective destiny. This collective process puts the power back into the hands of the people most impacted by the conditions and decision of the day. Here, the learning processes and experiences are developed in order to frame questions, conversations, and other pedagogical activities in age-appropriate, context-responsive, and culturally sustainable ways.

The CLE organizers believe that people residing in local communities know the issues first hand and therefore need to be fully involved in constructing the organizing focus and selecting the pedagogies to these issues. We do not intend to oversimplify this process and suggest that, if they simply show up, CLE participants will magically find the answers. However, we do know that when people share their stories in public with those who have similar experiences from different communities, from different generations, or with different gifts, a collective and creative deviance begins to manifest itself.

This collective and creative deviance takes place in a variety of crucial ways. First and foremost, the CLE provides opportunities for participants and their teams to return to their local communities prepared to deviate from the approaches, strategies, and actions that have not yielded the results and development. In doing so, these returning CLE participants inject a virtuous virus into their home communities and the organizations and institutions within them. This interjection of new change, approaches, strategies, and actions are innovations within these communities that can then spread contagiously to other community members, organizations, and institutions. Notably, the process by which participants and their teams have arrived at these new approaches, strategies, and actions is usually a deviation from how they have been developed in the past. Rather than isolated initiatives *acting on* community and largely informed by those learning, working, and living within it, the process of community change is now conceptualized as a collective endeavor in which the former CLE participants work to ensure that they are *acting with* their communities and the diverse perspectives and gifts within them. In sum, the CLE holds the potential to transform the *how* of community change.

Crossing Boundaries Enriches the Development and Educational Process

The ability and willingness to experience a world that is outside our daily comfort zone is necessary to break the isolation of people, teams, and organizations. This dynamic is familiar and easier to comprehend when we invite teams to join national CLEs, but it becomes more difficult to articulate when we host local CLEs. The traditional boundary-crossing we reference includes but is not limited to, geographic borders, economic borders, age, culture and racial borders, gender, faith, and differing abilities.

This border-crossing concept becomes more difficult to notice and articulate when everyone in the room looks like each other and lives in the same community, including the

facilitators. Within this context, the facilitators' ability to make the familiar strange is important. This process happens when the meeting place and space is altered; the teaching is shifted from traditional lecture mode to one that is dialogical, experiential, collaborative, and engaged. This border-crossing of ideas, questions, and learning processes is critically important to decenter the status quo and the traditional ways of knowing. This shift begins to rupture the comfort, status quo, and equilibrium we reach when a generative and dynamic conversation is missing from their institutional lives. This shift is also a move towards expanding our curiosity and imagination.

This process begins to invite and excite the curiosity of the learners. When community members are presented with a different language, mannerisms, and questions, they begin to accept the challenge to engage in the behavior themselves and construct their own questions. Even if they are not versed to frame specific questions, the invitation to express and exercise essential human curiosity is enough to begin. This is the magic of going to different places physically, emotionally, intellectually, and relationally. We witness this, too, with CLE participants.

Hope and Change are Built on Assets and Dreams of Locals and their Communities

We have learned that when CLE participants tell their own story, they begin to map their gifts, ideas, hopes, and wishes. This mapping includes ideological, relational, and geographical skills, riches, wishes, and assets. The identification, naming, and construction of these assets invite CLE participants to view their work and their community in different ways. Issues that have historically been assumptions immediately become opportunities, invitations, and points of action. Transforming one's mind and consciousness from distress and hopelessness to hope and possibilities is, by definition, the most radical transformation we witness during the CLE

experience. The exchange gives participants a new language, a different way of looking at the world, and a network of support that expands their community of practice while simultaneously breaking the isolation. In short, this reframing of our daily conditions from deficits to assets helps build hope and possibilities.

Moreover, this border-crossing within a semi-structured environment of a CLE becomes a space full of possibilities. Community members begin to develop a language that describes their experiences. They do so by using stories and imagination to both examine and reimagine their lived experiences and, thus, create alternate and multiple future possibilities.

Ecologies of Knowing

By the end of the CLE, participants experience a wide range of conversations, relationships, field site visits, questions, epiphanies, and moments of tension. These encounters test the multiple pieces of knowledge we rarely make public or export in traditional educational settings, including the cognitive, emotional, relational, critical, cultural, and historical. This intense engagement can push anyone into sensory overload, but we attempt to balance and navigate the learning within the following ecologies. We know that not all CLE participants will understand and/or utilize this framework, because we are all at different levels of our own development. However, the CLE organizers work to balance the learning within three central ecologies of knowing: self, organizations, and communities.

These three ecologies organize our thinking and learning experiences from the micro to the meso and on to the macro levels, or spheres, in which we experience life. Like life itself, these ecologies are bordered by permeable boundaries that leave room for exchange and interplay, but serve their purpose when making meaning of the engagement before, during, and after the CLE. These ecologies are not isolated. They spiral inward and upward, weaving within

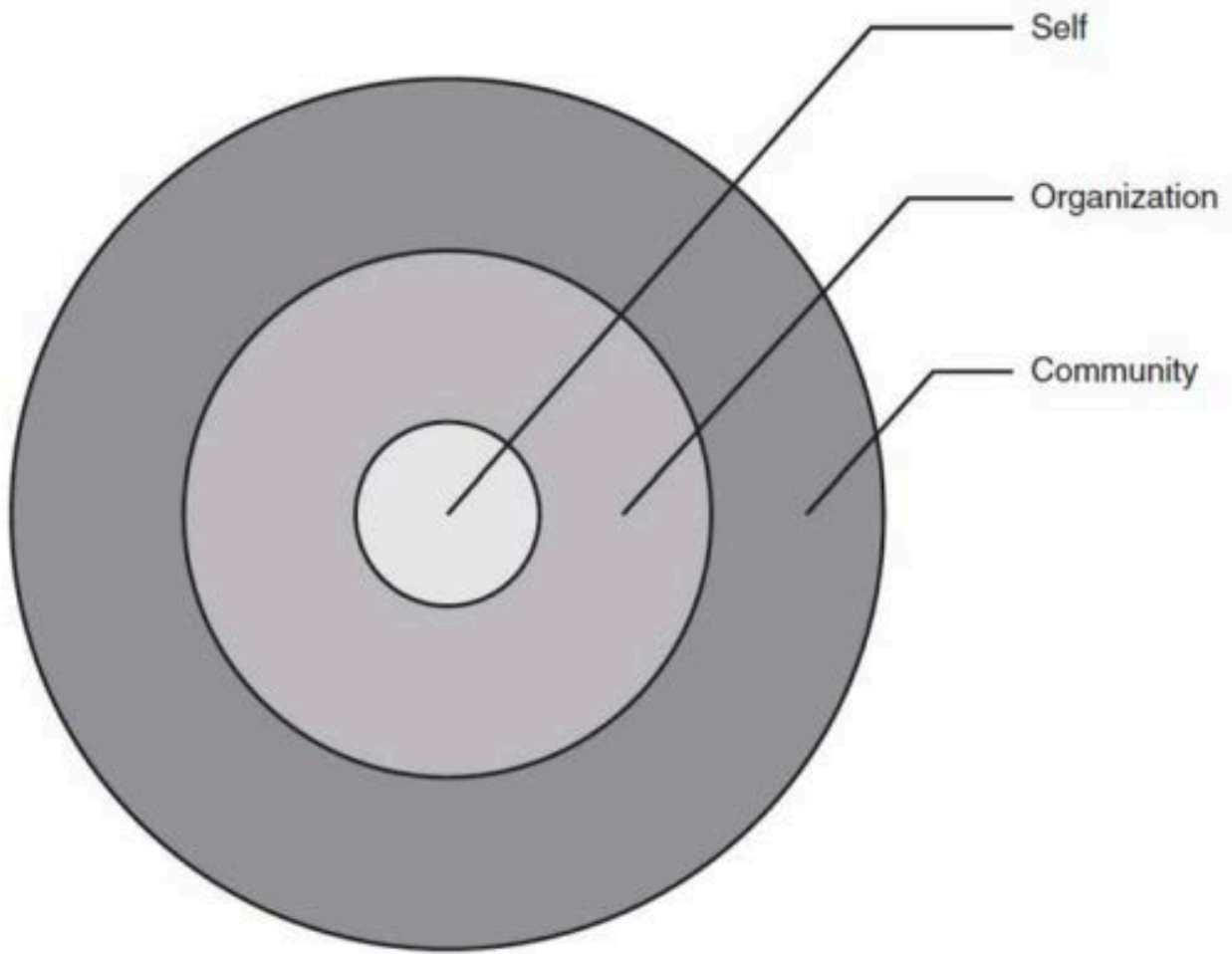


FIGURE 2.2 Ecologies of knowing

a developmental process as our experiences inform our schema. The visual representation is a top view, but looking at this process from a side view, one can also see an image of a cone with a spiral-connecting strand from the bottom foundation to the tip at the top of the cone, or the bottom, depending on your position of privilege or perspective. This spiral becomes the social DNA that weaves the ecologies and our lived experiences into a cohesive yet developmental complexity that is both simple and dynamic in its construction.

See FIGURE 2.2: Ecologies of Knowing

Self

As learners, the self is the basis of the world of knowing. Within a collective leadership philosophy that we have framed and practiced, there is a constant balance, or tension, between the “I” and the “we.” This is not presented as a binary, but rather a space that is both “I” and “we” at once, yet still a third space all the time. To negotiate this dynamic space, it is important that the individual have a solid foundation. This foundation includes the ability to filter information and make decisions in the best interest of the self and the organization. To accomplish this, the leaders must be at peace and in balance with their multiple ecologies.

We also believe that our individual constructions of self are invariably and essentially informed by our families. It is within our families that our sense of the collective first forms. We learn that others are necessary to meet our needs, and that it is through our relationships with others that we grow, change, and develop. We also learn through family that we grow and develop through our relationships, not only from what we receive, but also from what we give. Family is the original learning exchange for us. It is the context for our learning about the self, but also the social world around us. As such, we see profound value in the native Hawaiian saying shared with us that in order to first understand our roles in society, we must first understand our roles in our family. To push that relationship even further we have observed,

learned, and experienced that our families shape who we are, and both inform and are informed by the world—a dynamic that is shaped and sharpened by the CLE.

Organization

This meso frame is critical to honor our commitment to being a public people. We grow up in organizations and as educators and know that families, schools, churches, and other social collectives become mediating entities between the self and the larger society. These institutions and groups are critical to welcoming young people to the world, and the CLE plays this role for youth and adults alike. The CLE also serves as a mediating force for participants between many variables. It mediates between old understandings and new conceptions; passivity and engagement; obedience and empowerment; the status quo and a life of action; and, ultimately, oppression and liberation.

Community

The world at the macro level impacts our daily lives in good and stressful ways. Knowing the flow of forces and locations of power in our lives and communities is important in informing our work and action plans and the hope that life can change. As we have written before, to know that there is dialogue between the micro and the macro in a reciprocal way is valuable in informing our future actions and questions. This is an empowering dialogue that communicates and makes known our abilities to bring about change in our communities and world if we act collectively with one another. This understanding shifts the relationship with community from an external and immutable constraint to a web of interwoven relationships that can be influenced to become more nurturing and just. It is within community that we live and grow, so the healthier our communities, the more effective and just nurturers they become.

Weaving and Scaffolding the Ecologies

The ability to negotiate the ecologies in a seamless way requires an understanding of relationships and knowing of each other's stories within a Gracious Space. In a CLE, we have learned that asking the right questions is more important than having the answers. When we ask the right questions, CLE participants will find answers or a process informing where to go to uncover their need to learn and subsequently explore future inquiry. The weaving of the ecologies becomes a developmental process where we learn to make meaning of private and public experiences cognitively, emotionally, and in a relational way with the world. This spiral process is simultaneously generative and summative in a human and community development manner.

Summary: Meaning-Making, Axioms, and Ecologies

The Community Learning Exchange, although first experienced as an event occurring in an afternoon, day, or series of days, is much more than an isolated project or event: *it is a way of life*. Specifically, it is a way of life that challenges our thoughts, actions, practices, and relationships so that they might better support the development of healthier selves, organizations, and communities. It is a way of life that proposes *we learn best from real, lived experiences, and authentic and honest relationships*.

Working from the fundamental and radical assumption that the people closest to the issues are those best situated to address those issues and discover answers to the concerns that arise from them, the CLE invites us to experience and live through relationships that allow us to experience learning and leading as dynamic social processes, and have conversations for pedagogical purposes. When people participate in CLEs, they explore how they can cross boundaries in efforts to collectively construct solutions for organizational and community challenges that unfetter and mobilize the assets, strengths, and dreams of community members.

These efforts toward collective solutions developed to generate constructive and equitable changes in organizations and communities are supported by the five axioms of the Community Learning Exchange and framed within our three ecologies of knowing. These axiomatic principles become even more self-evident when lived and experienced, and the ecologies of knowing allow for the CLE participants to perceive and understand the various levels in which they are experiencing the problems they have, the challenges they face, and the way their lives are impacted and shaped by those problems and challenges. However, although the Community Learning Exchange begins with foundational axioms and ways of understanding the ecologies of our lives and experiences, because the goals of the CLE and those who form and attend them is to impact and change their circumstances and institutions that shape them, something else is needed. In order for participants at a CLE to engage in change processes for their organizations and communities, an understanding, a theory, of change is essential. In the next chapter, the Community Learning Exchange theory of change, developed from the efforts and engagement of the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development, is described and explored.

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