

CRCP Working Papers

Summary of Critical Moments Reflection

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The purpose of critical moments reflection

The nature of community social justice work is that it is characterized by urgency, complexity, constant change, unpredictability, and a high degree of personal commitment. People are learning through their experience of the work but this learning stays largely under the surface, below their awareness. There is usually little time and space for systematically examining what is being learned or articulating the knowledge or questions that have come out of their work. Yet the stakes are high—awareness of the learning that comes through the experience of community building work is important to responding effectively to the changing conditions of this work.

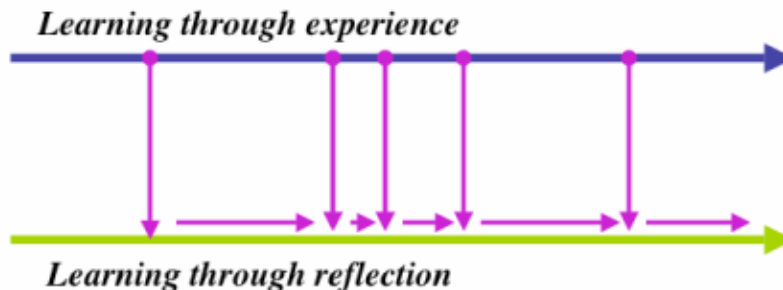
At the Center for Reflective Community Practice at MIT, we organize our efforts around surfacing and sharing the knowledge that resides in communities and facilitating the awareness of the learning that emerges from community building practice. We believe that

work will allow practitioners to keep their work aligned with deeper democratic and justice principles, and to innovate in the face of enormous complexity and unpredictability.

A flexible method we have developed for the reflective learning process is based on identifying where key shifts in the work have taken place, and to use the stories of those significant moments to drive the learning in the reflection process. We call this Critical Moments Reflection, and we have adapted it to fit a number of different kinds of reflective learning processes for people doing social change work. It can be done by individuals, groups, and groups of groups. It can be done retrospectively (about past experiences) or in real time (as something is being experienced), in more or less depth, and focused on a single critical moment or a whole set of moments relating to an area of work.

The basic steps

We start by asking individuals to name those moments that they experienced as significant



greater consciousness and visibility of the learning generated from social change

within a particular area of their work. If these individuals are doing critical

moments reflection as members of an organization, the contrast in the set of moments that are experienced as most significant from different perspectives in the work is often very interesting and can provoke a powerful learning discussion.

The next step is to narrow down to a subset of critical moments, to choose one or more to go into in more depth. This decision is usually based on which moment(s) will likely produce the learning that is most important to those involved (for example, they may have thought beforehand about questions or issues they hope to learn about and choose moments that hold learning for those questions).

For the selected critical moment(s), the story of the moment is told (sometimes from more than one perspective if this is done in a group), and then there is a collective analysis of the moment – what shifted, why, what led to the moment, what happened as a result. It is through the analysis that the meaning of the moment to the person(s) who experienced it is brought out and explored. The goal of the analysis is to become aware of why particular moments are experienced as significant and to examine the nature of their significance, allowing challenges in the work to be better understood, and often revealing important deeper questions.

The outcome

People who have done the critical moments reflection process report that it has allowed them to gain visibility

on their experience, the thinking they bring to it, their methods for doing their work, and the often hidden theories and assumptions that guide their work. We have also done analyses of transcripts from group reflection sessions that have let us observe the mechanics of collective transformative learning that take place during a critical moments session. From these analyses, we have identified the following outcomes of critical moments reflection:

- At a minimum, the process *generates basic awareness* of the tacit learning that has taken place for people in doing their work.
- The reflection process usually *extends and deepens* the learning from experience.
- People *sharpen and clarify their questions* about the work, or find new questions.
- When done in a group, the process leads to *developing connections* across individual experiences of learning through the work and *integrating the meanings* from different perspectives on those experiences.
- People develop *more complex understandings* of what happened, why it happened, and what it led to.

Although critical moments reflection ends with summarizing the learning that comes from the analysis of one or more critical moments, only some people stop there. More often, the process leads to an effort to re-integrate the learning back into the work, or to identify an inquiry question that will be

used to drive a conscious
learning or research process
going forward.