

El Agora: Citizens for Citizens

Tania Zulkoskey

In the heart of the second largest city of Argentina, Córdoba, is a gathering of community citizens reflecting on and debating the concept of “best practices”, and the outcome isn’t what you would think. El Agora is built upon the Greek definition of Agora: “to join, to assemble” and a “public square where the ancient Greeks got together to discuss and to debate” (<http://www.elagora.org.ar>). What this means in modern day Latin America is that citizens from many disciplines, including social work, gather to share grassroot ideas, implement projects, and more than anything, talk, connect and listen to one another. After spending two months at El Agora, talking with the staff and participating in round table discussions, it became clear that they have a different interpretation of “best practices” than many of their North American non-governmental organization (NGO) counterparts.

The concept of best practices is widely accepted in North America as one of the best things you could say during an interview for a health or government-related position. Best practice has emerged as a paradigm over the past decade. For example, *Social Work Abstracts* reports that 8 articles published from 1993–1997 used the term “best practice(s),” 33 articles in the period 1998–2002 and 84 articles from 2003–2008. Despite the popularity of the term “best practices,” there is no consensus on its definition (Kessler, Gira and Poertner, 2005; Ferguson, Jones and Cooper, 2007). The utility of the term is hotly debated (Ferguson, 2003; Kessler, Gira and Poertner, 2005). It has been argued that best practices is a prescription for efficiency forced upon social work organizations by funding constraints (Manela and Moxley, 2002).

El Agora questions the concept of best practices because it assumes a universal prescription fits all. “We don’t like it because it says ‘we are the best’” (Dunayevich, 2007). Instead, they suggest that we should think about multiple practices to fit different marginalized and disenfranchised populations. For example, in Argentina most domestic workers are women

and have few rights; no social security or benefits; and are not included in any comprehensive labour law. The question that should then be asked about “best practices” is: best for whom? “There is no such thing as best for all. The assumption is that everyone is equal and that is not true, it never is” (Dunayevich, 2007).

“THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS BEST FOR ALL. THE ASSUMPTION IS THAT EVERYONE IS EQUAL AND THAT IS NOT TRUE, IT NEVER IS” (DUNAYEVICH, 2007)

El Agora described a small project that helped some of the poorest women in rural Argentina. Garbage is often collected in horse-drawn carts for resale to recycling plants. The women in the project learned how to instead make products from the refuse. More importantly, they learned marketing techniques in order to sell their products. The women now had the tools to enter the labour market.

There is an old saying that if you give a hungry man a fish, he eats for a day, but if you teach him to fish, he eats for a lifetime. The adage presumes that there are only two alternatives, giving a fish or teaching how to fish, but in either case you are bringing something from the outside. However, maybe there are simply no fish left. People usually know exactly what they need and it is instead a question of resources and in many cases, privilege to access those resources. In the case of the women collecting garbage, they did not have the privilege, in terms of class and gender, to access resources such as marketing information.

The other problem with the fish-teaching analogy is that it is paternalistic. Help is seen to be external to the community rather than enabling the community to find its own solutions. Instead, we need to look at the larger picture, to step back from advice-giving and to re-examine our own class and privileges. Good practice at El Agora highlights the importance of building connections, listening to each other and addressing inequality. For example, El Agora’s integrative vision of security emerged from discussions between a wide range of community participants including social workers, security consultants and citizens. Rather than narrowly defining security as simply crime and enforcement, they considered the interplay between employment, health, gender and physical activity. These subtleties of culture and class are lost when “best practices” ignore the local context.

In one security project, they talked with local women about how to create a safer city. Based on the women’s feedback, they replaced large desolate spaces with soccer fields, which led to more people being outside and involved in their community. This community-based initiative contrasts with the usual top-down solution of placing more police officers on street corners. When people really review what needs to happen for them to live without fear and begin to talk about these ideas, the paradigm begins to shift.

Perhaps the most important element in El Agora's mission is the central idea that one needs a space for action and reflection. All of their ideas and projects are based on citizen participation and the ability to listen. In order to have citizen participation, El Agora also emphasizes putting information, laws and policies in common terms. They feel that you must share all of the knowledge that you have, and have people understand it, in order to receive more knowledge in return. "It becomes necessary to stimulate knowledge of the *others*, otherwise we are living among strangers" (original emphasis; <http://www.elagora.org.ar>). El Agora might exist because of the political and economic upheaval that has happened in the last century in Argentina that has forced citizens to look out for other citizens, but, the lessons of El Agora are not unique to Argentina. Globally, social workers can lead the way here as they are skilled in reflective listening and addressing major social issues with community-based solutions. With a mission of action and reflection, putting information into common language, perhaps El Agora is on to something, something like a good practice.

REFERENCES

- Dunayevich, A. Personal communication, October 26, 2007.
- El Agora. (2007). El Agora. Retrieved June 3, 2008, from <http://www.elagora.org.ar>.
- Ferguson, H. (2003). Outline of a critical best practice perspective on social work and social care. *British Journal of Social Work*, 33, 1005–1024.
- Ferguson, H., K. Jones and B. Cooper. (2007). Best practice in social work. *Clinical perspectives*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Kessler, M., E. Gira and J. Poertner. (2005). Moving best practice to evidence-based practice in child welfare. *Families in Society: The journal of contemporary social services*. 86, 2, 244–250.
- Manela, R. and D. Moxley. (2002). Best practices as agency-based knowledge in social welfare. *Administration in social work*. 26, 4, 1–24.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to the following El Agora members for discussions that contributed to this article: Andrés Dunayevich, Claudia Laub, Lucio Scardino, Betriz Rohl de Burgio, and Natalia Molina.

TANIA ZULKOSKEY, MSW, RSW (CLINICAL), CTS, IS IN PRIVATE PRACTICE IN BRITISH COLUMBIA (BC). SHE IS A MEMBER OF THE BC ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS AND A CERTIFIED TRAUMA SPECIALIST THROUGH THE ASSOCIATION OF TRAUMATIC SPECIALISTS, USA.