



LAES has developed a series of immigrant issue instructional modules entitled "Tierra de Oportunidad" for orientation to our complex society.

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## **INSTRUCTIONAL AREA**

*Responsible Community Member*

### **MODULE 19 Collaborating with Neighbors**

#### **Overview**

Getting involved -- talking about issues, participating in groups which get together to learn more about issues or to influence other people's perspectives, writing letters, phoning people, volunteering in civic organizations, and working in political campaigns, are all part of community participation and immigrants' social integration.

Building a foundation for successful community collaboration is one of the most important contributions that adult schools can make to community welfare and to the process by which immigrants are socially integrated into U.S. life. Without some experience of successful collaboration, immigrant communities are more likely to become closed "enclaves".

Becoming involved in collaborative efforts to better one's community is not a luxury but, rather, a survival skill. Immigrants who live in low-income communities are very unlikely to get the quality of public services which are provided to middle-class and upper-income neighborhoods. Collaboration is a necessity to address issues of common concern.

In whatever the particular context or set of problems students become involved, addressing such involvement is likely to provide them with valuable skills in inter-personal relations, teamwork, and problem-solving which will help them in their personal lives and, even more directly, in their work lives when they seek better, more responsible jobs. To a remarkable degree these skills are a foundation for dealing with a wide range of topics; at the same time, becoming involved in community issues may also provide some effective and concerned students a new career outlook or even a new job as a community worker for a local agency.

There is a macro-level trend in U.S. social policy toward de-centralized social policy. In theory at least, this trend will result in new opportunities for meaningful involvement in local community affairs. Working effectively in any of these issue areas requires participants to be able to collaborate productively with their neighbors, whether the neighbors are next-door families, co-workers, or other volunteers in a grassroots community organization.

#### **Basic Skills Development**

This module is oriented toward integrating basic skills in several different domains. Skills development domains addressed in this module include: listening, critical thinking, speaking, teamwork, negotiation, using resources, and problem-solving. Attention to collaborating with neighbors in addressing community issues is, ultimately, most valuable as a way to build experience and continuous involvement in exploring students' social environment.

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| <b>Interpersonal Skills:</b> | collaboration, negotiation, compromise, conflict resolution; |
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| <b>Teamwork Skills:</b>        | recognizing individual strengths and weaknesses; motivating and recognizing co-workers and their contributions to a common goal; working with people who are different;   |
| <b>Problem Solving Skills:</b> | breaking a complex task into component sub-tasks, sequencing sub-tasks;   |
| <b>Analytic Skills:</b>        | securing information, evaluating alternative information sources, testing the accuracy of information, generating "what if" scenarios to assess the impact of proposed courses of action;   |
| <b>Communication Skills:</b>   | active listening, note-taking, analytic questioning, persuasion;  |
| <b>Using Resources:</b>        | inventorying personal and information resources, the value of personal resources, using orally-communicated information, accessing information by telephone, using on-line data resources, using diverse print media as sources of information; |
| <b>Learning to Learn:</b>      | using multiple data sources, values clarification, reflection, hypothesis generation, hypothesis testing, hypothesis refinement, distinguishing fact and opinion;   |

### Teaching Points

There are many models for collaborative activities. These models can be found in publications on organizational development, popular books on interpersonal relations, and other areas. The skills development challenge of this module is for students to integrate a cluster of relevant skills and refine them in the course of working with their neighbors. In terms of learning management, this module is particularly useful as a way to extend learning beyond the classroom and reinforce student's confidence in their ability to mobilize and apply the basic skills they have learned in class.

1. **In multi-ethnic communities where different immigrant groups and U.S.-born families live together, it is important to consider the advantages of establishing or participating in groups which cut across boundaries.** Such cross-group coalitions are often more effective than homogeneous alliances in terms of getting things done. The process of building cross-group alliance is also valuable, healing existing tensions and conflicts, and building new bases for mutual understanding. The key to building such groups is finding common ground based on shared concerns. Openness, a willingness to reach out and talk to others, and patience are a crucial foundation for finding that common group and exploring possible areas of shared concerns.
2. **At the same time, homogeneous within-group collaboration is also valuable.** From a practical point of view, it is often easiest for families to start building their teamwork skills by collaborating with family, friends, neighbors, or "paisanos" to address common concerns and, then, later extend that collaboration to new groups.
3. **At a practical level, the most effective collaborations are ones where groups form to pursue their own concerns but are, also, open to conflict resolution.** Conflicts arise in many different areas -- between ethnic groups, between interest groups such as neighborhood families and city planners, between residents of low-income neighborhoods and drug dealers, and between loosely-allied groups of neighbors. Whatever the specific problem

being addressed, neighborhood groups are most effective when they can propose a plan of action which allows them an active role in solving or contributing to a solution to the problem while, at the same time, expecting others (e.g. schools, police, city, housing or health agencies) to be accountable for doing their job.

4. **Conflicts can also arise within community groups. The most effective neighborhood groups are those which can resolve these conflicts rapidly and equitably.** Differences of opinion about objectives (i.e. what's important to deal with), action priorities (i.e. what should be done first), and strategies (i.e. how to achieve a group's objectives) are inevitable.

These can split promising groups apart unless they are rapidly and fairly resolved. Students should practice the skills they have developed **in Module 18 -- Analyzing and Debating Community Issues** within neighborhood groups. In this respect, neighborhood groups have some similarity to the workplace and some similarity to family functioning.

5. **The most effective community action groups are those which are structured to allow different people to play different roles while, at the same time, respecting and valuing each person's contribution.** Effective groups are set up to accommodate people with different schedules, skills levels, and personal style. The most effective groups usually are those which, also, decide to devote time or resources to building their members' skills, an important mode of self-directed learning.
6. **Some well-established programs operating in communities where immigrants live are designed and receive government funding, to support active community involvement.** These programs include Community Action Programs, Head Start, and Migrant Education. All are required to provide ways to help low-income families become involved in guiding decisions about the services they provide. Similarly, many schools have Site Councils which are specifically intended to facilitate parent involvement. These are all important places where concerned residents can make a meaningful contribution to their community while building their skills in working with others.

### Sample Learning Activities

1. Conduct an exercise with the class to identify three community issues which students would be willing to work on. One way to approach this is to begin by putting on the blackboard a list of suggestions about important issues and paring the list down by allowing students to "vote" for an issue only if they would, in fact, be willing to work on it.
2. Discuss with students what kinds of roles they would feel comfortable working in as part of an organization set up to deal with one of three of the previously identified priority community issues.
3. Have students take an informal survey of their neighbors to get an idea of what community priorities are. This assignment might ideally involve teams of two or three students in each neighborhood, requiring each team to coordinate its strategy to conduct the survey among themselves. In reporting back to the class, each team might be asked to say how they divided up tasks and how well they think this division of labor worked.
4. Assign students the task of deciding among themselves the topics which should be addressed in the next three weeks of their course. Optionally, assign students the task of identifying three ways in which each could contribute (as peer instructors, as support staff, as "experts") to the topics chosen.
5. Assign a community survey exercise with the variation that survey teams consist of students from two different teachers. Classes might meet together to decide on priority issues as in Sample Activity 1 while the teams could be set up as in Sample Activity 3 with the

requirement that at least one student from each class is on each team.

6. Invite speakers from two local civic organizations to explain what their organizational mission is, how people may become involved, and what kinds of involvement are expected. After the presenters have left, discuss with the class the degree to which these organizations: a) reflect their interests and concerns, and b) provide ways in which they could see themselves personally involved.
7. Invite the Director of a local Head Start Center to explain the ways in which he or she attempts to involve parents in Center activities, what the problems are in securing high levels of involvement, and what strategies he or she is using to maximize involvement.
8. Invite the Director of the local Community Action Program or a representative to explain the legislative requirements for the composition of their Board of Directors, the kind of issues which the Board addresses, and the benefits to the agency of having grassroots community participation in its programs. Students might be encouraged to ask what the agency is doing about issues of concern to them.
9. Invite the Chairpersons of two school Site Councils (e.g. from an elementary school and from a middle school) to make presentations to the class about their role in children's schooling and the kinds of things they want their members to do to help out.
10. Invite a local businessperson who is involved in developing a new product or service to talk to the class about the kinds of teamwork involved (both within their organization and in conjunction with external organizational partners).

### **Extension Activities**

This module focused on participating actively in the community dialogue on local problems and issues may be extended to other important roles of students' lives. The analytic, inter-personal, and communication skills developed in collaborating with neighbors relates directly to collaborating within the household, with the extended family, and in the workplace, on issues where there may be deep divisions of opinion, or divergences in different individuals' skills levels, motivation, and personal abilities to work collaboratively toward a common goal.

This module can be used in abbreviated form as a basis for structuring one learning unit or, alternatively, as the foundation for a workshop or course focusing primarily or exclusively (ideally in conjunction with **Module 18 -- Analyzing and Debating Community Issues**) on addressing community issues. It can also be used as the basis for a strand or constant theme running through a learning program oriented toward life skills development or citizenship.

### **Resources**

Stanley Gajanayake and Jaya Gajanayake, **Community Empowerment: A Participatory Training Manual on Community Project Development**, Office of International Training and Consultation, Northern Illinois University, Pact Publications, 1993. [While this manual is based on experience in a developing country -- Sri Lanka -- some of the exercises may be useful to adult education instructors].

Terence G. Riley and Heide Spruck Wrigley, **Communicating in the Real World: Developing Communication Skills for Business and the Professions**, Prentice-Hall Regents, 1987.

On the World-Wide Web, the **LatinoLink** provides a gateway to a tremendously diverse range of "virtual communities", groups based on shared interest in public affairs, music, cooking, theater, or different Latino ethnic groups. The LatinoLink homepage has a useful review of other Websites, under the heading "Links we Like". Included among the LatinoLink materials are many personally

written pieces showing that "ordinary people" can communicate reach out and communicate with others, literally world-wide. The address for LatinoLink is:

**<http://www.latinolink.com/index.shtml>**

Not in Our Town a twenty-seven-minute documentary videotape and the accompanying instructor's guide tells the story of neighbors in Billings, Montana who joined together to take a stand against hate crimes. copies of the video and viewing guide are available from: California Working Group, 5867 Ocean View Drive, Oakland, CA 94618. Phone (510) 547-8484 or email:

**[wedothework@igc.apc.org](mailto:wedothework@igc.apc.org)**

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