Developing the Practitioner

Presentation to the
New Regions New Directions Conference
Townsville, March 2009

Paul Collits
Research Fellow
RMIT University
Key Questions

- What do economic developers do?
- Can they do it better?
- What do economic developers need to know (learn) to do their job better?
- What should a professional development program look like?
- The argument – PD is essential but it is not clear what form it should take
Two Views of Economic Developers

• Tom Peters:
  
  • “...a thousand inventors of urban, rural and suburban tomorrows”
A Less Flattering View

• One of life’s lowliest creations who walks the earth in miserable solitariness prayerfully petitioning the gods of Gross National Product to “bring me please, one small industry so that I may take it to my bosses and say unto them, ‘Lo! Masters thy humble servant is deserving a pat on my pointed little head for I have laboured long and hard in the vineyards and have produced a goodly harvest’” (author unknown).
Rationale for Local Economic Development Action

- Local action can make a difference to outcomes (Schumacher 1973)
- Localities best prepared will reap the rewards
- Consensus that local and regional competitive advantage can be created
- Government policy supports local economic development
- Professionalism is therefore critical
Two Approaches to Local Economic Development

• “ Shoot anything that flies, claim anything that falls”

OR

• Apply the lessons of experience and “the science” of LED

• Is there a science to LED, and if so where does it lie and how is it learned?

• We have to believe that there is more to ED that shooting anything that flies
The Practitioner’s Art

- Tasks almost limitless, many tools available
- Influence only indirect
- Constraints of politics, few resources, high expectations, lack of democratic mandate, feisty stakeholders
- Tyranny of short term wins
- Growing complexity of governance and development drivers (Sorensen 2000)
- Difficult strategic choices
- Keeping up with the latest thinking (fads?)
What drives LED success? And why is knowing this important?

- Strategy is driven by theories of what drives development (the why question)
- Competitive advantage can be created
- The actors involved want to make a difference
- Resources are finite, i.e., poor analysis matters
- The capacity to intervene is limited
- A bulwark against action driven by the lowest common denominator
Hence…

• Learning on the job or borrowing what they do next door is not good enough
• Doing “what works” is only part of the solution
• The practitioner needs knowledge, context, rigour and science
• There is an evidence base for action, strategy and policy – this can be learned and should be learned
The “How” and “Why” Questions

• How much is ED art and how much science?
• How much theory, how much practice?
• Skills versus knowledge – getting the balance right
• Is there a right way of doing ED?
• Can this be taught?
• Generic skills versus ED-specific skills
Learning Practitioners

• Practitioners come from many disciplinary and professional backgrounds
• Skills and knowledge vary enormously
• Fear of paralysis by analysis
• An inherently practical orientation
• Scepticism about academics
• Learning from other practitioners is highly valued – war stories, how to’s, case studies
• But … ED is not just the sum of the tasks
RMIT - EDA Partnership

• There is a need for a specific set of awards in economic development
• Multidisciplinary approach – economics, business, planning, geography, political science, demography
• Blend of “why” and “how to” learning
• Three award programs proposed – Grad Cert, Grad Diploma and Masters; MBA option
• Blend of online and short F2F offerings
• Commencing S2 2009
Ongoing Issues and PD Options

- International experience – IEDC, EDANZ, EDAC
- Intensive short courses versus full academic programs?
- Online versus F2F
- What status should be given to PD programs in accreditation of practitioners?
- RPL issues
- Still a small market
- Will be a long haul till the programs are bedded down and accepted