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Drawing On the Local: Collaboration and Community Expertise

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A short history of community/university collaboration is buried in the phrase "service learning." In the grammar of its implied narrative, the agent, actor, and source of expertise—the server—is the academy not the community. And the act of learning is more often a personal reflection by students on a broadening experience, than it is a public act of shared knowledge making. But what if we attempted to turn the tables: to transform service into a collaboration with communities and learning into a problem-driven practice of mutual inquiry and literate action? And what would it take to do so?

Our reflection on this issue comes in part from watching these questions come to life in an unusual forum—a community problem-solving dialogue with 180 stakeholders, including leaders in the urban community, leaders and staff from city youth organizations, and university faculty and students. This event, *Drawing on the Local: Carnegie Mellon and Community Expertise,* framed the problem in this way: How might community [illegible] questions [illegible] solvity facu3edinrseatian

marketing. The newly wealthy who have made their fortunes in knowledge industries have come to know their greatest assets rest in people and not in buildings or equipment. Therefore, they often tap quickly into the idea of viewing community expertise as a valued resource.

This resonates with the answer traditionally offered by the settlement house movement, which has been, "Move in." In the spirit of Jane Addams' early nineteenth-century Hull House, people become part of the life of the community. Actors, artists, and dancers, writers, researchers and entrepreneurs locate their work in the community, supporting its sense of its own identity (cf. Ball and Heath, 1993). College faculty and students can indeed enter the life of the community through participation in these enterprises, through music and athletics, through community churches. However, the "move in" move is most likely to occur as a consequence of an experience of genuine mutuality—an experience which service learning could potentially provide (Deans, in press).

The tradition of progressive education and inquiry, articulated by John Dewey (1916), extended by the prophetic pragmatism of Cornel West (1993) offers yet another answer which is, "Take action and inquire--together." The problem-posing, problem-solving temper of this stance emphasizes the agency and expertise of the community—especially the marginalized knowledge of the young and the struggling. It argues that without jointly set goals and an expanded definition of expertise, both service and learning will miss the mark (Cushman, 1998; Flower, 1997). The challenge this poses for students and faculty is not simply how to hear this local expertise, that may come to us in a language, argument style, or discourse we find unfamiliar or even discomforting. The problem is also how to construct a transformative understanding, that has some power to change both learners and the world they find.

The Problem—As Community/University Partners May See It

If any clear consensus emerged during the Drawing On the Local dialogue, it was that such collaboration is not the norm and that if genuine knowledge making was the goal, it would take a change in some attitudes and standard MOs to produce it. The rival hypotheses centered on just what those changes were.

The University's Vice Provost for Education, Indira Nair located a conflict close to home: drawing on local expertise means stepping outside our disciplinary discourses.

> At Carnegie Mellon—we call ourselves the problem solving university—the interdisciplinarity comes because no problem comes in little chunks. But one discipline we sometimes forget is the discipline of understanding knowledge that is packaged

The Art*Show* Case

By the early 1990s, community organizations based largely in the energy, imagination, and knowledge of local youth began to realize their future depended on finding ways to add capital to their financial base. A pattern of nonprofit organizations with for-profit arms began to develop as various kinds of community groups worked to develop services and products they could market.

Illustrated here is one such group from within a Boys and Girls Club. The drama team of the Club decided to shift their emphasis away from merely providing theatre for entertainment to developing interactive theatre that could work for educational and counseling purposes within a range of organizations of their region. This shift of format called for building a strong base of new knowledge and skills and working collaboratively with the public and private sectors of their area. The youth argued that the kind of project they wanted to develop would tie them closely to the "real world" of professions and would enable them to foster the idea among adults that young people could and would work with authority in a wide range of roles and topic areas.

The process they followed placed responsibility on the drama team to determine three issues of peak concern in their communities and to study in every way possible the domains of expertise and knowledge related to these concerns. For example, if the introduction of new types of illegal drugs was a growing concern, the study sessions of the young people included neurobiologists, chemists, law enforcement personnel, social workers, and physicians of psychiatry. If a growing problem within the region was parental neglect and sexual abuse of young children, different professionals would be called in to work with the drama team to introduce them to psychological theories, penalties imposed in various states, links between parental abuse and socioeconomic level, etc.

The drama team began a new season at the beginning of each summer. Over several weeks of the summer, the drama team worked with these experts to understand their three issues from every conceivable angle and then began to develop a drama through which they could bring audiences to a tense edge of understanding. The young people developed the script collaboratively as well as the descriptions and promotional materials about their work. They began by the end of the summer to visit service organizations, such as juvenile detention centers, parent support groups, drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs, schools, and the city's convention planning center. They promoted their program as one for which these groups would pay a fee for three hours of production and interactive involvement with the audiences.

Local groups began to see the value not simply in the dramatic productions of the drama team, but in the two segments of activity that followed each drama. Once the original drama reached a high point of tension, the group broke the action, turned their backs to the audience, waited a moment, and then turned to address in character audience members as individuals. Young people left the stage or platform to move in and among audience members as they talked and asked questions about the bases of their character's actions and beliefs. When tension rose to a peak, they snapped their fingers again, turned their backs on the audience for a moment, and then turned to address the audience as individual members around the question of "what did it feel like to play that part?" "What in my experience enabled me to get inside the skin of an abusive parent, a mom who denies that her boyfriend is sexually abusing her nine-year-old daughter?"

The openings for service learning show up when we look at the kinds of collaborative partners these groups work with, the dialogue sessions they create, and the range of forms of writing, reading, planning, and strategy-building they do.[3]

The first point to notice here is a twist on idea of service. These groups are working to provide service, yes, but it is also education and counseling on a contractual basis for groups that typically pay adult-only consulting firms for similar services. It is important to recognize that service is a hot commodity and that it makes more sense to pay young people for the services they offer in education and counseling as it does to pay adults. Moreover, such pay amounts to a community organization investment, for the fees go back into the nonprofit organization to enable them to sustain their work over several years without being donor dependent.

As more and more community youth organizations develop for-profit arms of their nonprofit organizations, the young members find themselves involved in what it takes to run a business, keep track of accounts and alterations in specific contracts, maintain files on who is and who is not licensed, and schedule performances. Computer science students or business students from local colleges often work side by side with the young people who have a familiarity with the task that has to done, but do not have sufficient calculating skills or familiarity with the legalese of official documents. Often young college students come into these organizations to

[3] Readers interested in a research report on more than a decade of anthropological fieldwork in community youth organizations can contact www.PublicEducation.org for a copy of Community Counts by Milbrey W. McLaughlin or Partners@livable.com for the resource guide and documentary video **ArtShow.** For a full bibliography of the research, contact sbheath@leland.stanford.edu.

work on a single set of technical skills with particular individuals who can develop a level of proficiency sufficient to enable them to become the organization's inside expert.

The second twist on the idea of service here is that enabling young people both to know and to transmit knowledge about such matters increases the possibility that information will be put into action. Critical in the program just described is the fact that universities and other forms of higher education helped the drama group find the experts necessary to ensure the young actors had substantive information to back their performances. Experts across a variety of fields came several days during the summer before each fall season to introduce their field and prepare the young people to take tests covering this material. Physicians, mental health clinicians, pathologists, and members of crime investigation units, religious leaders, as well as juvenile judges and probation officers, came to teach and discuss with the students. These experts gave of their knowledge, but they expected the young actors to give as well: to pass on this information to others in dramatic form and to lead sensitive insightful discussions with the groups for whom they performed. For many audiences, university experts could not have gotten either information or persuasive arguments across. Young actors could—for many groups that would never listen to adult experts.

These young people became conveyors of technical knowledge through their dramatic productions, and they gained in each performance information that made their interpretations and their audience interactions more life-like. The youth looked to university personnel for technical information that enabled the actors to gain respect from groups, such as youth offenders, with whom they could win no respect without a full knowledge, from medical and neurobiological terminology to slang terms for processing or using drugs, for example.

Other youth groups found similar ways to ensure that technical and background knowledge surrounded the work of their art. A visual arts group might strike up a trade between their studio and a graduate program in business. Young artists would sell their tee shirts at the business school, and business school students would volunteer a few hours each week to help young artists learn marketing and finance skills.

Reciprocity was the key in these university-community youth group interactions. Uniformly, youth groups rejected the idea that outsiders, such as university students or professors, came to their community organization to "service" them as needy youth. Instead, when a partnership of give-and-take worked out, both sides benefited. Getting people together to have discussions about what each group could contribute began to uncover these expectations and the diverse "stories behind the story" each group brought to the collaboration. It also lead to marked changes in attitude on the part of both

parties. University personnel invariably wanted to "reach out to help" community youth organizations, while the latter yearned for ways to show their expertise, energy, and value in meaningful ways to audiences they did not normally reach. Reciprocity ensured sustained interest and involvement on the part of youth and sometimes worked wonders in changing the views that university students had about "at-risk" communities and their residents—especially their young people.

The Community Think Tank Case

In this case we see the knowledge-producing power of intercultural problem-solving. The scene is an 80-year-old, inner city community house known for its focus on learning, writing and technology (Peck, Flower, & Higgins, 1995). A majority of the folks seated at the five round tables come from the urban community. Some have known first-hand the experience of being a youth "on the street" with little direction, or a woman in the uncertain transition from welfare. Others work in social agencies, community development groups, churches, community-based organizations, or service institutions—places where they have become part of a professional and/or personal network of support for people moving from the culture of struggling urban schools and neighborhoods to a changing culture of work. And still others at the table speak for the business world as human resource staff, managers, executives.

Everyone here is part of a university-initiated "Community Think Tank" designed to bring a wider knowledge base into the discussion of workforce development—into policy talk as well as the daily decisions that shape the practice of education, social support, or human resource management. Participants are sharing interpretations of the conflicts they see within a scenario built on the stories of inexperienced workers. The scenario shows new employees (and managers) confronting paradigmatic problems, from dealing with customers and technology, to reading tacit expectations and conquering fears. The scenarios go beyond the familiar issues of

outcomes." In this atmosphere of collaborative rivaling, community expertise plays a critical role in testing options, by projecting possible and probable outcomes from a vantage point decision makers rarely possess.

The academic teams faces a new literate challenge as well: How do you

We see these two cases as ways to challenge some traditional assumptions about where expertise “naturally” resides in a community/university relationship and how knowledge is constructed (and by whom) in these collaborative projects. Projects like these open the door to a research-based look at the sophisticated literate learning and negotiated meaning making that can emerge in youth-scripted performance and problem-posing projects. They suggest ways college students from across the disciplines can use the methods of intercultural inquiry to build working partnerships and to create service learning projects that draw on and nurture community expertise.

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