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## Learning From Community Projects

**W**hile the social activism we discussed in the previous chapter is a vital aspect of organizing, it is but one of a wide range of practices. Each organizer comes into the practice in a different way. The following offers a narrative of my journey to it. Throughout, I reflect on my teaching, experiences as a student and practitioner, and the ways these experiences inform my approaches to teaching the subject.

For years now, I have taught community organizing and community projects. The goal for these classes is to establish the grounding for the budding practitioner's subsequent social justice work. No class or community project or even understanding of the concept of justice is the same; rather, everyone comes to these classes in their own ways, from their own perspectives. Yet, in each class, I hope for students to connect their lives with some notion of community and civic engagement. Students are invited to view their experience and story in relation to larger injustices as well as solutions and possibilities. Sometimes awareness begins with something as small as a gripe about tuition increases at the school or a car accident; in other cases, it follows a friend or family member getting sick with HIV/AIDS or cancer, the callousness of the medical system, racial profiling, or an immigration policy gone wrong. Through such thinking, many students come to see and value something larger than their own individual self-interest. And many find themselves in the middle of a struggle to create change.

I was first assigned to teach Community Projects at California State University, Long Beach, and then at the City University of New York (CUNY). In teaching these courses, I have always asked students to consider the links between the history, theory, and current practice of both community organizing and agency-based practice. Before teaching, I spent well over a decade consumed within the practice in settings including

AIDS housing, harm reduction, syringe exchange, welfare rights, grassroots organizing, community gardening, and the like. I also tried to keep up with the literature in social work. In doing this, I was constantly reminded that what was written about practice rarely kept up with what was going on in the field. So much had happened since the 1960s as radical social work and community practice continued to shift and evolve across a range of issues, including immigration, labor abuses, deinstitutionalization, homelessness, environmental disaster, HIV/AIDS, anti-war activism, and struggles against neoliberalism. I attempted to address this shift in my writing, activism, and teaching, reflecting on these changes in each class.

Throughout the classes, students are charged to take on the complicated circumstances of urban poverty, organizing, and community development, as well as services provision. Here, students are given the opportunity to compare their hopes and desires with the realities on the mean streets. In doing so, students are charged to become reflective practitioners as described by Schon (1987). In order to deserve Schon's designation, students are asked to contemplate and study the basic tools of a field to the point where "knowing and action" become one gesture (p. 25). To get there, students are asked to connect the dynamic work taking place in neighborhoods and communities with their budding development as practitioners. This interplay between the streets and classroom in community practice infuses vitality into their ways of seeing.

## Approaches to Community Engagement

Throughout each class, students are asked to consider a range of approaches to community engagement. I suggest the following approaches: let stories move them, build community, go get the seat of your pants dirty with real research, organize around strengths, connect with a model, and connect the dots of a struggle within their own stories. Let's take a closer look at these approaches.

### Let Stories Move You

For community practice and organizing to be useful, many students develop a meaningful connection with their own communities. My first social work internship at the Chicago Area Project (CAP) in 1995–1996 had helped galvanize this point. As part of my orientation, I learned about organizers associated with the project dating back to the 1930s. The organization's founder, University of Chicago sociologist Clifford Shaw, collected oral histories of delinquent youth, documenting their stories to highlight the multiple dimensions of their worlds and the various impacts on their lives. The lesson from Shaw's work was that there is no need to remain detached when listening to these stories, especially if one listens carefully with an eye toward changing social conditions (C. Shaw, 1930). Reading these stories, I was spurred into participation.

By the second year of my time in Chicago, I followed Shaw's calling, interviewing many of the organizers who had worked with him starting in the 1930s. One of the first

interviews for my oral history was with Billy Brown, a diminutive 86-year-old African American woman with short, curly brown hair and animated eyes. She explained what she had learned about neighborhood life from Clifford Shaw.

I think Dr. Shaw felt that this was yours. This was my plot where I belong so I want to make it the nicest part of my life and the nicest part of my entity to live here. It was just like a castle, like a castle that belonged to you. And he felt that way about each person. Just wherever you went that was your home. If you were a part of it, you lived there. Its small neighborhoods, that's what it was, small neighborhoods. And he felt that you could organize wherever you went. And this organization could be your castle. (quoted in Shepard, 1997a)

A love for community was intimately connected with her story. Brown was not the only member of CAP to reflect on the group's neighborhood emphasis.

Another organizer with the group, Tony Sorrentino, recalled Clifford Shaw's understanding of community:

Shaw's approach was, sure he wanted to bring about change in the community but he believed in the notion that the way you do that is by neighbor helping neighbor. And so that was his experience of growing up in a very small town in Indiana in the early days of industrialization. He would give us such examples, if somebody's farm or home burned down, the neighbors all automatically came together, they didn't apply for a grant or call in the government. They just did it themselves. Likewise, with the delinquent, he'd get out of line, they didn't call in juvenile court. They just handled it informally. (quoted in Shepard, 1997a)

Sorrentino organized around a notion of community as primary interaction; here community is understood in terms of people's interpersonal interactions with each other (Effrat, 1974). Community conceived of as primary interaction includes aspects of Toennies's explanation of *Gemeinschaft*, which "included the local community, [it] also went beyond it . . . it referred to social bonds, . . . characterized by emotional cohesion, depth, continuity, and fullness" (Effrat, 1974, p. 3). Clifford Shaw outlined his community organizing philosophy in a 1939 report to the board of trustees: "[CAP's] activities are regarded primarily as devices for enlisting the active participation of local residents in a constructive community enterprise, for creating and crystallizing neighborhood sentiment on behalf of the welfare of the children and the social and physical improvement of the community as a whole" (p. 4). The core lesson of this approach becomes that student organizers must respectfully engage those involved within the life of the community, cultivating their "active participation" just as Shaw had once done.

To tap into this "active participation" one has to have a solid grip on the conditions as well as the cultural terrain of the community. To develop such an understanding practitioners assess conditions in the social environment, finding out what the community wants and then acting on it in a respectful manner (J. Bennett, 1981). Without this needs assessment, community practice is flawed from the start.

Much of this process begins with listening and relationship building. “This is a basic community organizing principle: you can’t go to a community and say, “These are the things you should care about,” notes Washington, D.C., based organizer Mark Anderson: “You gotta go to them and you gotta talk to them and get to know them and find out what they think. And from that place of building a relationship where you have some mutual respect and understanding, then there’s actually a reason why they might listen to us, and we will probably discover that our vision of the revolution has been transformed by our encounter with them. If only we can be open to actually listening as well as speaking.” There is a “revolutionary power of an open mind and a listening ear.” Cultivate an empathic ear.

### **Build Community and Democracy in the Classroom and the Streets**

My goal for each class has come to be threefold: to build a community among students, to connect the campus with the community outside it, and to help students develop their own sense of social justice and democratic political engagement. When I first sat in Irving Spergel’s community organization and development class at the University of Chicago I was struck by his sense of connection with the community, its pulse, problems, strengths, and people. A scholar of gang life, he talked about the life of members of the gangs he worked with; he hired them to do research with him. He wrote stories about them. He brought organizers into the classroom, and helped us feel like a community as we conducted our research studies. He also helped us see where organizing fit into the larger picture of the social work. Early in the class, he invited Saul Alinsky’s protégé Ed Chambers to talk about ACORN’s approach to organizing. Harkening back to Alexis de Tocqueville, Chambers suggested U.S. democracy was dependent on three elements: the market, the government, and a civil society. In between the market and government, there had to be space for civil society. Without it, democracy would be in peril. Over the next two decades, this idea would become more and more influential to my writing, teaching, and activism. *Civil society was word for public space and community. Without it, democracy as we know it would be doomed. And it is up to all of us to keep it going.*

“Go get the seat of your pants dirty with real research” was the advice of Robert E. Park, a luminary of the Chicago school. His point, of course, was to get out and get into the action. The best way to find answers about community life is by participating in it. If you are studying the lives of dancers at a club, go dance with one of them. Don’t stand on the sidelines with a clipboard. Go hang out and get to know what is going on (Bulmer, 1986). If you are interested in learning about those looking for work, don’t just study the census or unemployment rolls, go talk with the unemployed as well as those looking to hire them. Talk to all the stakeholders, find out what they think is going on. Get out into the mix and try to learn from these experiences.

### **Organize Around Strengths**

During this same period, I ran across the writings of John McKnight (McKnight, 1995; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). Find a community strength, McKnight

implored community practitioners. Each community has one. Don't just look for what is wrong. That is too easy. It is the job of organizers to find community assets, from day one. Look at what pushes communities forward. What gets them to click. Map community resources and assets. In communities people know by stories, he advised (McKnight, 1987). Solutions to challenges faced in the community will be found within these stories, assets, forms of leadership, cultural capital, social networks, and the like.

For McKnight (1987) regenerating community begins by recognizing that the typical social policy map is broken into two dimensions, between institutions and people. He argues that this thinking is flawed: that there is no acknowledgment of a role for community involvement or associations. He warned that a deficit-based therapeutic model sees community in terms of pathology and illness in need of correction; this leads to fragmentation and rejection of local knowledge or expertise, shifting funding toward services as opposed to local leadership. Loretta Pyles (2009, p. 129) warns, "Communities have been invaded by and colonized by professionalized services that have disempowered citizens and interfered with ways people can engage one another." With little to no room for input, those impacted, the consumers, reject current models (Heller, McCoy, & Cunningham, 2004).

It does not have to be this way. Rather than depend on institutions, the policy map could be drawn around community associations as well as counter-power. This community of associations includes interdependence among bodies, recognition of fallibility, indigenous leadership, flexibility rather than institutional interests, rapid response to problems, relationships individualized, and citizenship expressed. Here, regular people find a voice to speak and create solutions on their own terms (McKnight, 1987).

In fact, many early social workers were opposed to community practice driven by community members. In many cases, "the experts," social workers and policy analysts, had no special insight into or solutions to neighborhood problems. The social work establishment worried about those without training counseling delinquents. Clifford Shaw saw an opportunity to create a new paradigm. To help stem the tide of delinquency, he organized local leaders who worked with kids who had gotten in trouble. This group negotiated to have neighborhood youth spend time with local mentors under supervision. However, social workers said that this was work that could only be done by licensed social workers. The result was unsurprising: the youths, who had formed a bond of trust with their neighborhood mentors, did not trust the social workers. Community ties to the people doing the work were lost. The point of the CAP community approach to delinquency was to appreciate the assets that all community leaders possess, not just their official credentials. The question for students of community projects would be, How do social workers collaborate with community efforts, instead of talking down to people?

The problem is not uncommon. "The social worker is compromised if she or he becomes convinced that she or he possesses a technical expertise that is more to be defended than is the work of other workers," notes Paolo Freire (Moch, 2009, p. 94).

"They come to the people of the slums not to help them rebel or to fight their way out of the muck," Saul Alinsky explained (Meyer, 1945, p. 1, cited in Homan, 2008, 2011).

Instead, far too much social work seems instead to preserve the status quo. “[T]hey are paid to carry out dehumanizing institutional policies of social control when what is really needed is social change,” writes Robert Knickmeyer (1972, pp. 64–65). “[M]ost social work does not even reach the submerged masses. Social work is largely a middle class activity guided by a middle class psychology,” argued Alinsky. “In the rare instances where it reaches the slum dwellers it seeks to get them adjusted to their environment so they will live in hell and like it” (Meyer, 1945, p. 1, cited in Homan, 2008, 2011).

Through community projects, social workers change the hat they wear so they can actually collaborate and respect community practices. “And get respect in the community by doing things the community wants, by joining with them and enduring, for a time at least, the mistrust,” elaborated Frances Fox Piven. “You have to expect mistrust because it is well founded. But I think only in practice can social workers become credible partners with low income people. It’s a long term process” (quoted in Shepard, 2008b, p. 11). Over the years, much of community practice would come to incorporate such a perspective (McKnight, 1995).

Probably the most useful way to start this process is to respect the strengths of a given community. Here organizers tap into the greatest assets in a neighborhood: its people, history, and culture. Different communities have different strengths. For some, they are cultural; for others these have more to do with social assets. Every community has them—whether they are individuals, groups, networks, or associations. The challenge for organizers is to find them. This is part of why cultural research is so important. Look for what works in a given community. Instead of the “needs driven dead end” employed by non-governmental organizations [NGOs], strengths-based approaches reject models that see people as problems or communities in terms of negative statistics (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). Instead, strengths-based organizers break down lines between expert and non-expert, suggesting there are other ways to conceive of community life; that people can still be seen as active agents, rather than as clients. “The alternative path, asset-based or capacity-focused community development, can lead toward the development of policies and activities based on the capacities, skills and assets of lower-income people,” explains Loretta Pyles (2009, p. 129).

Wonderful things happen when regular people access their own power and seek to create change in their own communities, when local people find their voice, expression, and collective power. “The key to neighborhood regeneration is to locate all the available local assets to begin connecting them with one another in ways that multiply their power and effectiveness and then to begin harnessing those local institutions that are not yet available for local development purposes,” notes Pyles (2009, p. 129). Much of this process takes shape through the capacities of people involved in the current moment, the agendas they create, and the networks of informal and formal ties and relationships they bring to bear on the issues at hand.

“One thing that I’ve learned through activism is that anybody can do this,” mused Eustacia Smith, a housing provider and direct action organizer in New York City. “You don’t have to have an education, you don’t have to go to school—anybody can participate in activism. In pushing for people’s rights, you don’t have to have any particular skill, you can participate.”

Smith's message speaks to a frame of social work-based organizing rather than professionalized models of practice. "I think that comes from a history of social workers starting out as being these people that create a lot of social change, but then at some point started struggling for becoming a profession and there was so much emphasis put into that," noted Eustacia Smith in a personal interview for this book, echoing a theme in the social work literature (Reeser & Epstein, 1990). "In terms of being a social work student I would encourage people to spend time working in community organizations for sure," argued Smith as a response to this trend. "So many people go to social work school and say, 'I want to be a therapist. I just want to be a therapist.' It's not what it's all about. At least it wasn't for me."

### Connect With a Model

As I was finishing my master's degree at the University of Chicago, Irving Spergel convinced me that Clifford Shaw and the history of Chicago delinquency was a topic that had already been well mined. So I decided to look to other alternate subjects and movements. This challenge became much more feasible when I moved to New York. It was a matter of days before I had plugged into the local activist scene and become involved with organizing around public space. After a few years of activism and research, I entered the doctoral program at Hunter College School of Social Work, where I hoped to reflect on what has happened out in the field. For my dissertation research, I collected the stories of organizers, asking them to reflect on their own practice. Listening to their many stories was one of the most joyous endeavors I have ever undertaken. One garden activist counseled that activists involved in the movement recognized the utility of connecting multiple methods, from direct action to legal strategies, mobilization with street theatrics and art, as part of their citywide organizing campaign to save the gardens. You may not win if you have only a rally, another cautioned, but if you connect it with lobbying, direct action, research, mobilization, and media work, that perfect storm of actions may create power and change, he explained. As I listened, I realized that many organizers see their work as part of a coherent organizational model. We can't be guaranteed success in every campaign, another organizer cautioned, but we certainly court failure if we do nothing. So it is useful to fight back, with a coherent organizing strategy that includes a clear position statement about what one wants to see happen with a given issue, research around this issue, mobilization of allies, coherent direct action, and media and legal strategies as well as a jigger of fun to sustain the campaign (see Sheppard, 2011b).

### Connect the Dots of a Struggle Within Your Own Story

I was drawn to my first demonstration with the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) after a close family friend suffered a long, painful period of mental and physical deterioration before succumbing to HIV/AIDS. On the ride to the action, I spoke with other AIDS activists about the experience. Many shared similar stories. After the action, I reflected on the ways our different stories interconnected. This

experience of sharing stories became the inspiration for my first real research and activism (Shepard, 1997b). Hearing all these stories, I was compelled to take part myself (Shepard & Hayduk, 2002). This is part of the beauty of community projects; they allow us to be moved, to revel in an interconnection between stories, people, and communities. Martin Luther King Jr. (1963) long ago suggested our destinies are woven into a single garment of history. From this point of view, all of our lives are interconnected within a matrix of stories and gestures. The point of community projects is to explore connections between communities and stories. Students consistently report that their favorite part of the class is the class presentations, in which they share their findings and reflections on their projects. I have had students stand up and narrate their family histories as immigrants, connecting their stories with intricate gaps in immigration policy. Other students have talked about their experiences with losses to HIV/AIDS or their experiences with shifting conditions in neighborhoods. One group of students created a documentary film project, with interviews from an anti-war march. Others saw a lack of green space in a neighborhood and created a community garden. Many practitioners have come to describe an approach to learning by participating in community projects as service learning.

### Community Projects and Service Learning

Each class in community projects involves a degree of service learning, engaging students in meaningful service that impacts the community. The goal is to cultivate ethical citizens with a reflective awareness of the interconnections between local practices and globalized systems. Here, students are sent out into the world to compare the theory they are learning in books with the realities of practice in the streets. The practice is rooted in the work of early 20th-century philosophers John Dewey and William James, as well as Hull House founder Jane Addams who famously linked social services with organizing and research with activism. It assumes that learning takes place when one develops “habits of mind,” to borrow Dewey’s words, to observe one’s self in interaction with others in their community. This is an approach to citizenship in which regular people see their lives in a social context. Sociologist C. Wright Mills famously distinguishes between “personal troubles of milieu and the public issues of social structure.” For Mills, “Troubles occur within the character of the individual and within the range of his immediate relations with others,” while issues “transcend the local environments of the individual and . . . involve crises of institutional arrangements and larger structures” (Dolgan & Baker, 2010, p. 3). Through such thinking, service learning bridges modes of inquiry with community projects, emphasizing collaboration rather than paternalism. Students engage in dialogue with stakeholders, building their work around the expertise of those in the community, while reflecting on the process (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). And along the way, students tend to become not only better citizens, but stronger students (Ehrlich, 2000).