Democratic Relationships in Service-Learning: Moving Beyond Traditional Faculty, Student, and Community Partner Roles

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In the discipline of architecture a groundswell in service-learning (SL) gave the pedagogy traction twenty years ago, around the time Zlotkowski’s (1995) article “Does Service-Learning Have a Future?” was published. A primary impetus was when Auburn University’s Rural Studio began building small-scale structures in Hale County, Alabama, one of the poorest communities in the country (Freear, Barthel, & Oppenheimer, 2014). Many other design and architecture programs have since developed other models of design/build, including disaster relief design, humanistic design, and most recently Public Interest Design (PID), which at its core means including stakeholders in the design process (Abendroth & Bell, 2015). The Center for Community-Engaged Design (CC-ED) at the University of North Carolina Greensboro (UNCG) is one such program. The Center connects UNCG’s Interior Architecture majors and students from other disciplines to projects with various communities in and around Greensboro using PID. Travis directs the CC-ED, where Liz is a community guest and contributor, and Allison is an undergraduate student fellow. Through the Center we are all involved in interactions between UNCG and the adjacent Glenwood neighborhood, collaborating particularly on the issues of homelessness, food insecurity, and community development.

As the three of us consider the future of service-learning and community engagement (SLCE) we suggest that the field must attend to relationships between stakeholders, ensuring that they are designed and conducted in such a way as to encourage democratic civic engagement (Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton, 2009; see Saltmarsh, Janke, & Clayton in this collection of essays). Such engagement encompasses “students learn[ing] cooperative and creative problem-solving within learning environments in which faculty, students, and individuals from the community work and deliberate together” (Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton, pp. 10-11). We value these attributes of engagement not only because they express what we aim for in our relationships but also because we have observed what happens when any of them are lacking. We have found examples of both democratic and less-than-democratic engagement at UNCG.

UNCG’s campus is growing “across the tracks” into the Glenwood neighborhood. As the University has expanded, the neighborhood has shrunk. The University has negotiated the limits of this southward expansion with the neighborhood association, but community-university relations have been strained, to say the least, as a result of the campus expansion. The Glenwood community is one of the poorest (42% of the residents live below the federal poverty line), hungriest (the USDA has designated Glenwood as a low income/low access food desert), and most crime-ridden (40% more property crime and 11% more personal crime than the city as a whole) in Greensboro. It is also one of the most richly diverse neighborhoods in the city — racially, ethnically, and culturally. As one example of this diversity, the CC-ED partnered on a project to produce a mural painted on the exterior wall of a convenience store operated by Nepali immigrants, across the street from a Nation of Islam mosque, down the street from a furniture store owned by a Colombian businessman, and around the corner from a bookstore serving as the headquarters for the local Occupy movement. That diversity of residents and organizations and the vibrant networks associated with them are among the neighborhood’s most powerful assets.

The CC-ED has become an essential part of the issues surrounding the campus expansion because, although this process goes beyond any single discipline such as architecture, planned expansion has everything to do with the design of the built environment and what architects and designers do. In addition, the CC-ED also occupies a storefront where the campus meets the community and offers a unique
space in which the authors and others have developed new ways to imagine relationships between the University and Glenwood. This storefront works, in part, because it is neither on the campus nor centralized in any one neighborhood. The three of us have worked together, formally and informally, on several SLCE initiatives in the Glenwood neighborhood, where Liz resides and Allison has family roots.

Our relationships with one another and other members of the local community have not been formalized in the context of a course, research project, design project, study, or any other structure tying us to a budget, schedule, or scope. Instead, they have developed through having informal discussions in the community and sitting around the coffee table at the CC-ED storefront. Our relationships allow us to think big and ask “what if” questions that more rigid structures might preclude. They also provide the space and time to consider assets as well as deficits in our community. Such relationships require listening skills, problem-solving skills, and patience. For example, through patience and listening we have developed a community garden project in Glenwood—an idea that Liz brought to the coffee table—that has engaged students, faculty, and community members.

We have learned in our work together that democratic relationships among all stakeholders are critical to successful SLCE—being more authentic and more impactful than the all-too-common relationship between faculty member and community partner in which the faculty member’s expertise serves the community member’s needs. When SLCE projects are defined and originated only by faculty expertise or by community needs, partnerships are less than fully democratic and we miss opportunities to learn and create change together. Our own experience suggests there is great value in collaborations not limited by the usual hierarchies implicit in relationships among faculty, students, and community members. In other words, we value partners taking on roles beyond those customarily circumscribed, and we find that the associated potential for relationships to be more democratic can, in turn, lead to highly relevant and meaningful SLCE projects (see Pisco in this collection of essays).

Students as Co-Creators of Projects with Community Members

For SLCE to thrive as democratic civic engagement, students must be able to be part of initiating projects and not be limited to joining pre-determined projects developed by faculty members. As an example, in 2014 a small group of students established a relationship with the Interactive Resource Center (IRC)—a day center for people experiencing homelessness, formerly directed by Liz—and the homeless community by engaging in a dialogue around tiny houses. What began as a small group of like-minded individuals meeting weekly at the IRC soon grew into a community-based movement. The group decided to build a tiny house prototype with donations and a small grant. UNCG students contributed significantly to the beginning of this movement, now Tiny Houses Greensboro.

Allison offers the following reflections about some of the impacts of this grassroots, community- and student-developed project:

For years I had driven by the IRC on my way to my daughter’s ballet classes but never knew exactly what went on behind these doors. Last summer, I was a research fellow at the Center for Community-Engaged Design and attended a community meeting at the IRC on the topic of “Housing the Homeless.” I was there to listen. Many organizations and individuals had been actively working on issues surrounding homelessness in Greensboro for many years without finding a solution. Was the solution rapid rehousing? Was it co-housing? This group at the IRC wondered if the solution might be the current trend toward the development of Tiny House communities around the country.

As summer students we were trusted to represent our university and connect with members of the community who I may have never encountered otherwise. Being part of the momentum to seek a solution has a reward well beyond a grade. You get plugged into real lives and learn that people struggling to survive on a subzero night have names, birthdays, and families. Slowing down to really listen and understand that you need to learn how to help is a gift. I would not know many people today who matter in my life if I had never gone to the IRC.

This summer work at the IRC led to further levels of connection between the community and our university. For example, through the CC-ED I met William, a homeless man who would eventually speak to faculty, students, and the larger community at our “Housing the Homeless” symposium. His life experiences strengthen our efforts to help end homelessness in our community.

The IRC Tiny House group still meets on Fridays, now with an almost finished full-size tiny house! No longer do I feel that I don’t belong at the IRC but instead feel that I am equipped to jump in and help change my community alongside other students and community members.

Community Members as Builders of and Teachers about Relationships

Democratic engagement in SLCE also means that leadership roles must be assumed by community
members to leverage the power of partnerships. They are the experts in community history, structure, resources, and needs. Their leadership – in practical and symbolic forms – in turn can be indicative of established social capital and an increased capacity to influence long-lasting change in the community. In the following quote, Liz reflects on her experiences as a Glenwood community member, specifically speaking to this capacity of community members to serve as experts and to the importance of relationships that can grow and shift in service of long-lasting impact:

Even those who live in a neighborhood like Glenwood see the community through a lens that is limited to – and often limited by – the networks to which they belong. Service-learning projects that acknowledge that a community is not a monolith, and that dynamic and fluid relationships reach deeper than partnerships, are much more likely to have a lasting impact on the neighborhood they are serving. It is not unusual for community members to build new relationships within their own communities because of shared involvement in a university-initiated service-learning project, which in turn forges deeper and more far-reaching relationships with the university. For students, when projects include relationship-building skills, broaden the definition of “expert,” and are flexible enough to allow learners to test out new ideas and practices, service-learning goes way beyond simple philanthropy.

Faculty as Colleagues of Students

To reach these deeper, more sustainable relationships, faculty members must also be willing to play supporting roles in SLCE, as colleagues of students who are not only participants in but leaders of SLCE. Faculty must be willing to give up, or share, ownership and even authorship of a particular idea, research question, or project. Ego must give way to make room for collaboration so that democratic ideals truly can be realized for the good of all involved.

In the case of another Glenwood project in which a student served as the facilitator, the faculty role was defined as supportive follower. The following reflection from Travis describes the importance of faculty working in support of students who are of the community (see Siemers, Harrison, Clayton, & Stanley in this collection of essays) as they provide leadership to SLCE projects:

I had been working ‘around’ the Glenwood neighborhood for several years, considering the design of the neighborhood-university interface with different interior architecture design studios; however, I had not gotten to ‘know’ the neighborhood until I engaged an undergraduate student. The student became the facilitator, with strong family ties to the community and the people in Glenwood. The initiatives and relationships that have followed her involvement have been more meaningful and deeper for me as a result.

The most meaningful project on which this student and I collaborated was a mural for the Glenwood neighborhood. The student connected the CC-ED to several schools in Glenwood, led a group of these students in the design of the mural, and followed through by assisting these and other neighborhood children in painting the mural. Shared responsibilities between myself and this and other students resulted in a mural that was of the community and executed by both university students and community volunteers. This modest project has been a catalyst for the neighborhood and has spurred additional investment in the neighboring buildings.

Challenges to Establishing Authentic Relationships

Establishing relationships like those we have described is challenging. First, on most campuses tenure and promotion guidelines – including those guidelines that incorporate SLCE – encourage faculty members to pursue scholarly work measured in, for example, grant dollars, publications, committees, and impact (often defined by journal readership). Second, universities divide students by majors, disciplines, and degree programs and encourage them to arrive at a disciplinary focus and to graduate as quickly as possible. Finally, community members do not operate on academic calendars or organize their work by semester-long projects or assignments, and they have many professional responsibilities. With faculty busily trying to “fill the buckets” of teaching, scholarship, and service to meet promotion and tenure pressures, and with students scrambling to finish degrees on time and without much room to explore big ideas, there is little time to form meaningful relationships across boundaries between campus and community and amongst the various people involved in these relationships.

It becomes imperative, therefore, to leverage relationships – meaningful, democratic relationships – to share the weight of creating positive community change. To overcome these challenges we recommend that students be encouraged to collaborate as co-leaders with community members, that community members be empowered to identify community priorities and co-lead projects, and that faculty learn to see students and community members as colleagues and to collaborate on projects in non-hierarchical, democratic ways.

Conclusion

Most importantly, students, community members,
and faculty need to first find ways to forge relationships that cannot necessarily be accounted for in traditional ways such as an annual report so that the perspectives they each bring can be valued and understood through listening. Equally importantly, the implicit boundaries amongst titles, roles, and responsibilities need to be crossed or even dismantled so that each contributor is empowered to be an originator or a follower, a teacher or a student, on any given idea or collaboration. We have experienced the power of these two principles in our work at the CC-ED. Our relationships have allowed us to engage with a community that otherwise views the University with skepticism, and we have produced and undertaken SLCE opportunities that come from all who involve themselves in community design efforts. Future efforts in community-engaged design projects – and the SLCE field at large – can heed lessons learned from these types of democratic relationships. Commitment to these principles, along with a shared off-campus space in which to collaborate, can lead to sustainable relationships focused on social action and community-building, thus bringing the field closer to fulfilling the civic and democratic promise of SLCE.

References


Authors

TRAVIS HICKS (thicks@uncg.edu) left a successful career in architecture and interior design five years ago to teach full-time at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. An assistant professor of Interior Architecture and director of the Center for Community-Engaged Design, he embraces SLCE, focusing his scholarship and teaching on projects that advance social justice while recognizing conditions related to poverty, degraded environments, access to education resources, and community empowerment. Travis received his master’s degree in architecture from Princeton University.

LIZ SEYMOUR (liz@lizseymourwriting.com) retired in 2014 from her position as the founding executive director of the Interactive Resource Center (a day center for people experiencing homelessness) in Greensboro, NC. A former freelance writer for various design magazines, she made a career change to lead the IRC in 2009 after becoming more intimately involved with Food Not Bombs and the Greensboro homeless community. Liz has a degree in American Studies from Smith College.

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