Review Essay

On The Promise And Practice Of Service-Learning: A Search For Deep Partnerships With Broad Community Impacts

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*Rebuilding Community After Katrina: Transformative Education
in the New Orleans Planning Initiative*

Ken Reardon and John Forester, Editors
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It seems to me that much of what has been written lately about service-learning is more aspirational than exemplary. That is, we seem to be pretty ambitious when we write about what service-learning can do or ought to do but are less forthcoming about projects that actually deliver impressive outcomes. This is especially true when we think about scaling up, that is, when we talk about large projects, founded on deep, equitable partnerships, that produce significant community impacts. When I have been asked for examples of such exemplary, impactful projects, I have offered up the work of Keith Morton in Providence (e.g., see Morton & Bergbauer, 2015) or the work of Kenneth Reardon in East St. Louis (e.g., see Reardon, 2003). Surely there must be others. So, I am constantly looking for cases such as these and I recently found one in Reardon and Forester's report on a large service-learning project they helped to organize in the Ninth Ward of New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina.

Their project is notable in scope and ambition and it is a credit to the contributors that they can convey its complexity and drama in such a slim volume. They tell the story of the ACORN University Partnership (AUP), a collaboration among two well-established and successful grassroots organizations and three universities that aimed to combine city planning expertise with rigorous community organizing to bring disaster relief and redevelopment to the Ninth Ward of New Orleans. This is not a conventional academic account with a linear narrative. Instead, the editors serve up a kind of scrapbook from the AUP containing mostly personal reflections representing different stakehold-

ers in the project, along with two examples of some of the products of their efforts: (a) a copy of the executive summary of the People's Plan for Overcoming the Hurricane Katrina Blues: A Comprehensive Strategy for Building a More Vibrant Ninth Ward, and (b) excerpts from Brian Rosa's photo documentary project on returning Ninth Ward residents. These are sandwiched between brief biographies of the dozen contributors telling us who they were then (in 2006) and where they are now. From the outset we see the diverse team assembled for this project – veteran community organizers; senior planning professors; graduate students who started their programs with impressive and diverse experiences; and undergraduate novices, some of whom were taking their first planning course. In their brief biographies and in their personal reflections, we get a sense of their talents and their motivations and some of the presuppositions that they brought to the project. And we are able to glimpse their evolution – as thinkers, planners, and engaged citizens. It is not only a hint of the long-term magnitude of the project but a welcome hint within an overall service-learning literature that offers far too little exploration of longitudinal results.

The chapters offer the reader a Rashomon-style experience. The story of the AUP is told and retold, and we get to experience it from the perspective of a number of different stakeholders. Common threads emerge. Most of the writers agree on most of the events and the chronology, but less so on what those events mean, and we quickly appreciate how experience and meaning can vary based on one's positionality. This evokes the truism within service-learning that different stakeholders bring different

perspectives to the table. In the AUP, we are reminded that the constituencies are not monolithic. ACORN (The Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) and ACORN Housing bring different perspectives on politics and strategy that are not always in agreement. Residents represent different neighborhoods, different communities, and some of the same and some different interests. And there is considerable diversity in political outlook and priorities within the city and state governments. The authors, within the limitations of a small space, introduce us to a multiplicity of these voices, illuminating both the common cause of all of those people struggling to recover from a natural disaster and also the tensions, contradictions, and varied aspirations they embody.

The AUP thus encompasses many moving parts, and Forester alludes to the many unwritten books hinted at within this one. We can hardly fault the editors for what they leave out because what they offer has so much to teach and inspire us. Some of those missing details may be found in more conventional academic writings (e.g., Rathke, 2011; Reardon, Ionescu-Heroiu, & Rumbach, 2008.). This volume focuses on the story of a successful and highly improbable partnership. What I do here is offer up a skeletal summary of the story and gloss over some of the lessons the contributors took away. We can then return to the opening question and consider why such projects are seemingly so rare and make a case for why they should be more common.

THE STORY: In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina ripped through the gulf coast of the United States. The hurricane resulted in a loss of more than 1800 people, displacement of more than a million people, and losses totaling more than \$108 billion (Data Center, 2016). New Orleans was hit especially hard, with many neighborhoods flooded and evacuated. In the months following the flood, the city's population was reduced by more than half, with many people scattered in an expansive diaspora while waiting to hear whether or not they could return to their homes.

Shortly after the flood, Wade Rathke, the founder and chief organizer of ACORN, then the nation's largest community organization serving low-income people, reached out to Reardon, then chair of the Department of City and Regional Planning at Cornell University, to propose working together to draft a plan to protect and rebuild the devastated neighborhoods of tens of thousands of poor African-American residents of New Orleans. Richard Hayes, the director of special projects at ACORN Housing – a subsidiary of ACORN – was a graduate of the Cornell Planning Program and

he proposed a partnership in which his alma mater would lend technical assistance for relief, recovery, and rebuilding. It appears that at the outset, the expectations were not ambitious. ACORN was competing with 65 professional planning firms to gain jurisdiction over some of the relief and recovery efforts in New Orleans, and they reasoned that an affiliation with Cornell would strengthen their credentials while offering to bring more to the table than the professional firms with whom they were competing. It appears that from the beginning ACORN was hoping that Cornell's cachet would help them get a foot in the door. What the ACORN-Cornell partnership produced went well beyond anyone's initial expectations.

THE PARTNERSHIP: In fall 2005, ACORN sought assistance in developing a plan for the Ninth Ward, a predominantly African-American neighborhood with a mix of low-income and working middle class families, which received some of the most extensive damage when the levees failed. Several months after the flood only 20% of Ninth Ward residents had returned to their homes to repair and rebuild (mostly without insurance payouts or government relief), and the city was contemplating demolishing the entire neighborhood and turning it into a greenway or park. About that time, Cornell sent three faculty to a survivor's conference in Baton Rouge and it was then that Reardon began formal talks with ACORN. Reardon and his colleagues then designed a series of classes and studios around issues facing New Orleans and offered these to Cornell planning students in spring 2006. Several students from these courses went to New Orleans that spring to work on gutting and removing debris from damaged homes. That summer, Cornell sent nine interns to New Orleans (drawn from the courses) to work with students from the University of California Berkeley and Pratt Institute on design projects for the city. In June, ACORN invited Reardon to help them compose, in the face of a frighteningly short timeline, a proposal to the Rockefeller Foundation, to jointly develop a comprehensive revitalization plan that would restore local infrastructure and the built environment to its pre-storm conditions. Cornell signed on, and was joined by faculty from the University of Illinois and Columbia University. The AUP proposal was the only one submitted by a nonprofit group. Despite the fact that the remaining 65 proposals were submitted by professional planning firms, the AUP was chosen to serve as district planners for the Ninth Ward, which presented them with the opportunity to develop a comprehensive plan that would compete with plans from other neighborhoods for development funds.

Reardon, Rathke, and Hayes assembled the team

that eventually included ACORN, ACORN Housing, and planning faculty, staff, and students from Cornell, Columbia, and the University of Illinois. At Cornell, Richard Kiely and Michelle Thompson designed a workshop class on planning for post-recovery New Orleans, and this was supported by the work of Lisa Bates' development studio class at the University of Illinois and a team of engineering students led by Rebekah Green at Columbia's Earth Institute. Together they designed a training and research program to prepare people to go into the Ninth Ward to gather data to produce a comprehensive plan. Eighty students then travelled to New Orleans to collect the data in four days of intensive fieldwork. But right before the fieldwork was to commence, ACORN pulled the plug on the partnership. Nearly every chapter in the volume mentions with consternation the moment when the University group was "fired," and the stories reflect different perspectives on this event. Suffice it to say that the split resulted from unaddressed political and philosophical differences among the partners.

At this point the University team members were offered opportunities to partner with other planning groups. Instead, they made the decision (another complex story) to proceed with data collection and develop their own plan. This sudden separation from the partnership resulted in a \$32,000 budget shortfall. Reardon covered the expenses with his own credit card, hoping that Cornell and ACORN would eventually reimburse him. The Cornell group then brought 80 students to New Orleans, divided them into two 40-person teams – one qualitative and one quantitative. The qualitative team conducted 230 interviews of Ninth Ward residents (both local and in the diaspora) using an 83-question protocol. They also interviewed 70 business owners. This work involved direct engagement with storm survivors. Some students were received well, some with suspicion, and some (though rarely) with anger. But it appears that nearly all residents who were approached ultimately agreed to participate, and in the end were grateful to work with students willing to hear their story when city officials and developers had shown no interest. These interviews produced data essential to the participatory planning process embraced by the Cornell team – that is, planning that incorporates the perspectives of as broad a sample of the community as possible. At the same time, the quantitative team inspected 3500 properties using both GIS data and physical inspection, revealing that as many as 75% of the houses could be rehabilitated, which contradicted windshield surveys by the city that suggested that nearly all homes were unsalvageable. Interviews indicated that residents had strong interest to move back and

restore and revitalize their neighborhood. The data were then taken back to Cornell where students and faculty used them to prepare the "People's Plan for Overcoming the Hurricane Katrina Blues," a plan that produced a vision of an environmentally-sustainable, economically-vibrant, and socially-equitable neighborhood. The plan differed from other submissions in that it was data-driven, offering more unique data than any of the professional planning firms' proposals. And it was a plan based on input from local residents through a process in which the data collected and the interpretations thereof were shared with residents at community meetings and where recommendations for redeveloping the neighborhood were discussed and approved. At the outset, hardly anyone expected the Ninth Ward to receive any redevelopment support, but the city council and development authority adopted the People's Plan to widespread international acclaim, and allocated \$145 million for its implementation.

THE OUTCOMES: The story has a bittersweet rather than a perfect ending. The authors write with modesty and self-criticism about the impacts of their work on the Ninth Ward, and I found the accounts of their accomplishments understated yet impressive. Most notably, the neighborhood slated for demolition was spared, and many folks were able to return to and restore their homes. This outcome was all the more improbable because the residents had been historically marginalized and disempowered by previous planning practices and zoning policies. This commitment to restoration likely would not have happened without the AUP. The People's Plan was adopted, people's voices respectfully inserted into the planning process, substantial financial resources were allocated for the neighborhood, and a community won against formidable odds.

Meanwhile, there was plenty of deep, transformational student learning. Many, if not all, experienced spikes in idealism and (not their words) empowerment, professional competence, and an affirmation of personal values and purpose. One cannot read the students' frequently poignant reflections without being moved.

But people came away with some bruises as well. The project was often unsettling for all who were involved, and all stakeholders describe genuinely painful moments (e.g., when partnership leaders argued amongst themselves) and frustrating outcomes (e.g., not knowing whether the plan would directly benefit specific informants with whom relationships had been established). The authors tend to end their reflections at the adoption of the People's Plan, and offer only the smallest hints of

what happened after that. We do learn that the plan was not fully implemented. We get the sense that not all of the funds allocated made it to the neighborhood and that restoration was not as extensive as the People's Plan had envisioned. And we learn that the problems of racism, discrimination, poverty, and political disenfranchisement that shaped the catastrophe of Katrina and that differentially impacted poor Black families in places such as the Ninth Ward were still very much in place after the restoration efforts were undertaken. And so we sense an ambivalence among the book's contributors – a recognition that they accomplished a lot and put everything that they had into this project – but also their frustration that their more idealistic visions were not realized.

And it was a bitter ending for ACORN, which became a favorite target of the political Right in the run up to President Obama's 2008 election. ACORN was alleged to be engaging in voter fraud and other illegal activities, and became the poster child for the Right's voter fraud campaigns. They were one of the earliest targets of agent provocateur James O'Keefe's video stings that contributed to O'Keefe's rise to infamy. And they were subjected to a barrage of ridicule and scorn by a variety of Fox News hosts (Atlas & Drier, 2012; Diamaggio, 2010). While they were never formally charged, and indeed were cleared by the General Accounting Office of criminal wrongdoing, the barrage of bad publicity led many donors to withdraw support, and ACORN filed for bankruptcy in 2010.

OBSTACLES AND CHALLENGES: A project of this size and scope, with so many moving parts, with so many perspectives, and with so much at stake for the lives of so many people, had no shortage of challenges. There were incompatibilities between academic and community calendars, with crises and deadlines often emerging when university students, faculty, and staff were on vacation. There were a multitude of logistical challenges posed by trying to manage a complex operation from afar. Funding was at times a struggle. Different stakeholders brought competing agendas and conflicting philosophies to the table. The development authority overseeing the work in New Orleans set a demanding schedule for deliverables, frequently changing mandates and deadlines on short notice. (The frequent changes in demands for deliverables was referred to in many of the chapters as the "deliverables death march.") There were tensions resulting from breakdowns in communication exacerbated by a high stress environment and characterized by oppressive workloads and ever-looming deadlines. There was an unhealthy rivalry and bickering between the qualitative and

quantitative research teams that to a degree replicated differences manifest within the planning profession but here created "frayed working relationships that were effective but not always pretty" (p. 208). Students perceived frequent arguing among the leadership and an absence of effective means for mediating internal conflicts in the project. And, of course, all of this happened amidst the day-to-day challenges of a major humanitarian crisis that left hundreds of thousands of people homeless and in a community where poverty is endemic.

The contributors do not offer a magic pill for dealing with any of this. Certainly, some of the logistical challenges could have been avoided if ACORN had chosen a more proximate partner, though of course much of the gulf region was struggling to get back on its feet at the time. And ACORN benefitted from its existing relationships with Cornell and certainly made good use of the resources that its partner schools had to offer. We do not learn much about the details of how this partnership was financed, but it appears that Cornell contributed substantial funds and personnel and was supportive in embracing its Planning Department's efforts to redesign some of their curricula around the New Orleans planning work. The stories suggest that throughout much of the project, the team members were in crisis mode and everyone struggled with the stress. My sense is that one would experience similar kinds of stress in other big projects, and certainly deadline stress is endemic to most professional work (though we ought to challenge whether it has to be like that). Hence, the experience was frustrating but also authentic and empowering. What the AUP did do was persist – in the face of waves of crises, they continued to reflect on what was going on, kept their eyes on the prize, and just kept going. This observation is neither profound nor comforting but that does seem to have been one key to their survival and success. What is not quite clear is how they arrived at this persistence rather than panic (though apparently some of the deadlines did indeed induce panic). Perhaps it was the high stakes of the project and the proximity to human suffering that helped them persevere. Or perhaps it was something in the students' and faculty's preparation? We would benefit from knowing more details about the curricula and the pedagogy – particularly about how students were prepared for their fieldwork. This is one of several instances where I would have appreciated learning more – if only because I have hit this wall several times in my own projects – those frustrating instances where the students run up against one or more roadblocks and opt to bail. Why didn't the students in this effort bail? I could imagine other interventions that might have been useful in help-

ing to diffuse some of the stress, such as incorporating conflict resolution, dialogue training, and team management within the workshops. Perhaps this was done. Yet, Forester suggests that the students could have been much better prepared and hints that the issues noted above ought to be part of their preparation. Here he quotes a reflection from Reardon:

As privileged members of society we were not prepared for tough fights that we were unlikely to fully win! But poor people confront such situations all the time and don't have the luxury of walking away – as our students did – in a sense, at the end of the semester. (p. 207-208)

SOME LESSONS: The contributors note that there is not a comprehensive checklist for doing participatory planning, though there is certainly a substantial body of method and theory. But so much of what needs to be done is contextual and contingent upon the particular circumstances. And so it would seem to be with large service-learning projects. There is much to be distilled from the stories and reflections that the contributors offer but they do not easily convert to a generalizable set of do's and don'ts. Here are a few lessons that stood out for me.

It might be said that the AUP was founded on some common understandings, and in the face of great need overcame a good deal of misunderstanding. They were able to do this within a politically-charged social emergency where the consequences of actions and inactions could be prodigious and where people outside of the broad partnership had the capacity to move the goal posts at a moment's notice. ACORN sought assistance from Cornell because of the technical planning expertise they could bring to the team. Cornell specifically chose to work with ACORN because it represented poor and working class people who were not given much of a chance to be heard in the politically-charged post-Katrina environment. ACORN was widely disliked by government officials and other developers, largely because of their political grit and their fierce advocacy for their constituents. The success of the project depended on both the planners' expertise and ACORN's grit and organizing skills. Reardon notes:

ACORN had to sue the city to prevent them from taking down houses. They had to challenge the city to test the water to determine its potability. They had to question the way the building inspectors determined losses because this affected insurance. . . . reimbursement rates. They had to sue FEMA. . . . regarding their failure to provide trailers in the

Ninth Ward. They had to pressure banks not to foreclose. . . . Finally, all of this work was occurring in a place where everything was complicated – [there were] no city records, no hospital services, no copy shop, etc . . . (p. 204)

All members of the partnership came to the work with presuppositions about the other partners. The original understandings within the partnership had to be frequently re-evaluated based on real-time challenges. For the planners it meant, among other things, narrowing their vision of the scope of the project and determining who constituted the community they were serving. For the ACORN organizers it meant, among other things, abandoning stereotypes of out-of-touch ivory tower academics and privileged students and embracing their unique contributions, not just in terms of planning expertise, but in the gritty, on-the ground work of physically inspecting buildings and providing valuable human contact with survivors while eliciting stories and feedback.

We, of course, encounter expected service-learning best practices within this project, the things that we would expect to find in any successful service-learning project and this bears repeating. Students' service was substantial even though direct engagement with community members was limited to, for many, just four days of intensive fieldwork. The fieldwork was followed by immersion in analysis and composing the plan at Cornell as well as ongoing communication with partners in New Orleans. Outcomes were substantial and expansive. Students helped to produce professional deliverables on a "deathmarch" schedule, engaging in real, in-the-moment planning and playing a key role in assembling an against-all-odds successful campaign. They incorporated reflection into their practice, which helped them to find and keep their bearings. They found their own voices speaking up in public meetings and they experienced empowerment from their successes. They expanded their capacity for empathy and solidarity by making a human connection with and genuinely listening to people unlike themselves (for some of the undergrads, for the first time in their lives), and they discovered a capacity to communicate across those differences. They heightened their awareness of their own privilege. They deepened their understanding of and capacity for praxis. They marveled appreciatively at human resilience. And they thought a lot about when and how planning and justice meld and when they do not, about what works and what does not and why, and in so doing prepared themselves for lives as engaged professionals and citizens. These outcomes for students led the editors to wonder what all this says about conventional curricula.

The contributors tell us a lot about how the students struggled with the real everyday politics of complex planning – not the politics of getting a proposal approved – but the politics of working with others and of confronting the complex *realpolitik* of city government with its long history of factions, infighting, discrimination, and corruption. The stakes were high – hundreds of millions of dollars of development funds – and students were sometimes disillusioned when they realized how much the ideal planning process is mediated by raw political struggle and how things do not always work out the way that they should. While the *realpolitik* of the fight for resources seemed to unsettle everyone, it appears that it was especially unsettling for the students, who might have been better able to cope if they had come to the work with a better understanding of the history of the city and with a power map for key players and issues. The takeaway for me is that there is always history, there is always politics, and there is always more to learn about them, and it is perilous to insert our students or ourselves into communities if we do not have a pretty solid understanding of these things. They should be standard components of service-learning preparation.

One clear key to the success of this project is the principle of inclusion that governs Cornell's vision of participatory planning. The commitment to including the widest range of interests and voices and to building understanding through dialogue and engagement was so strong that it resulted in the University group getting temporarily "fired" in a dispute over how expansive the project would be. ACORN viewed the project as being primarily responsible to its members while the University team believed its responsibility was to the residents. Perhaps the partnership survived this crisis because it was built on a strong foundation of communication and inclusion, and this is reflected in this report, which is impressively polyphonic and manages to tell the story with grace and nuance without privileging the positions and perspectives of the editors.

Forester and Reardon conclude that to the degree that this project was successful it was because of their notion of critical pragmatism (Forester, 2012), which requires the interweaving of three practical elements:

- (1) the need for dialogue for understanding what the community's issues really were, (2) the need for expertise and debate to determine technical, legal, economic and engineering realities, and (3) the need to develop negotiating power so that dialogue and analysis could influence action for change. (p. 223)

While the authors develop critical pragmatism within a professional planning discourse, it is not hard to see how it would readily apply to other justice-oriented partnerships.

As mentioned earlier, there is a point in the narratives where the AUP has its funding revoked and Reardon reaches into his wallet and puts the budget shortfall on his credit card. For some readers this may be one of several "I can't possibly do that" moments in the book – an event that leads them to turn away from the story in the belief that there is nothing to be learned or borrowed from a project built on such extraordinary conditions, expenditures, and personnel. I have had my own experience with this – of folks disengaging from a workshop or presentation when they hit that – "but I could never do that" moment. And so I want to make a special plea. There is much about this project that is indeed extraordinary. And while the outcomes were improbable from the start and were effected through the extraordinary actions of an impressive number of dedicated team members who chose to ignore looming improbability at each decision point and who chose to persist when things seemed insufferable, the simple takeaway is that is what it takes! Extraordinary projects require extraordinary efforts. To get distracted by the credit card matter or by Cornell University's generous financial assistance or by the team members' extraordinary expenditures of patience in the face of daunting challenges is to deny the possible. There is danger in thinking the takeaways of the AUP are not for us because we cannot yet imagine that we could do what they did or that we could respond bravely or creatively in similar circumstances.

AN INVITATION: Are there more big impact projects out there? If so, please find a venue to broadly share your stories. Perhaps the projects are out there but we do not know about them because they have not been published within the academic mainstream. Perhaps projects such as this one require a kind of activism and engagement that is at odds with traditional promotion and tenure guidelines. Perhaps there really are so few of these large-scale exemplary projects because we have a hard time imagining ourselves to be as ambitious, creative, or brave as the people on the AUP team. Perhaps the onerous demands of such an undertaking require project directors to prioritize things other than conventional academic publishing. Regardless of the reason, I urge service-learning and community engagement faculty and community partners to share their stories. We need them for inspiration and guidance. One outlet to consider would be the Service-Learning/Community Engagement Future Directions Project (www.slce-fdp.org).

CONCLUSION: As we learn in the book, Reardon takes on the full-time job of coordinating the AUP while holding another full-time job as planning department chair, and he gets squeezed. And, and as most of us likely know, getting squeezed poses a threat to one's personal and professional wellbeing and hence a genuine risk to undertaking work such as this. It is a credit to the AUP team that this book comes out at all and it is our good fortune to receive this account in its unconventional literary approach. This project produced a lot of good. It is exemplary and inspirational in many ways. There is much insight to be mined from this story beyond what I have shared here. For me, included among the takeaways, are the possibilities for changing the priorities of our own practice and that of our departments and universities, and bravely redefining how one can go about being an engaged scholar.

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