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Engaged scholarship: reflections and research on the pedagogy of social change

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Significant shifts are occurring in higher education pedagogy, research methodology, and community development, ones that value civic engagement and experiential learning as bridges to holistic education and sustainable social change. Engaged scholarship through university–community partnerships can result in providing a well-rounded education for students, a widening of the university’s knowledge base, and an empowering investment in community change. Yet, perpetuating unequal power relations and contributing to a deficit-based approach of service can thwart the social change efforts of community-based education. Critically engaging these complex notions, while integrating promising pedagogical practices, is crucial for effective service-learning and community-based research. This paper provides an overview of these topics and the personal and collective challenges and benefits students, faculty, and communities face as a result of campus–community partnerships.

Keywords: engaged scholarship; civic engagement; service learning; community-campus partnerships; social change; community-based; participatory research; experiential learning

Introduction

In order to produce socially responsible students who are able to engage with the critical problems of our times, significant shifts are necessary within higher education pedagogy and research. A shift toward community-based experiential learning can result not only in enhancing student learning and civic engagement but also in altering the epistemological priorities and methodologies of the university. Furthermore, engaged scholarship can expand the social, cultural, and human capital of both local communities and universities and generally better our attempts at understanding and addressing social ills. Successful community-based education programs involve a classroom forum that theoretically grounds the experiential learning experience of students, a curriculum that rigorously analyzes the complexities of service and social justice, and on-going relationship building, communication, and assessment of the shared values and goals of the community–campus partnership. This paper will explore both the building blocks for and critiques of engaged scholarship and the ways in which teaching techniques can be critically re-imagined to include an experiential learning pedagogy of social change.

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While the majority of academic research remains within the confines of the university setting, exceptions to the exclusive trend of academia have erupted at different points in our history, revealing the existence of some version of community-based education dating back to the land grant colleges instituted with the Homestead Act of the late nineteenth century. The practice was also evident in the early history of formal education during the cooperative education movement and the beginning of John Dewey's work on experiential education in the early twentieth century. Other examples were seen through the work of the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Experiment in International Living programs of the 1930s, as well as the student involvement in fighting Jim Crow and other socio-political issues during the civil rights era between 1954 and 1974 (Oden and Casey in Calderon 2007; Stanton, Giles, and Cruz 1999).

Many scholars locate the beginning of an era wherein academia moved to truly value, seek, and institutionalize community-based education in college curriculum, mission, and culture with the charge offered in 1994 by renowned scholar, Ernest Boyer. He described how a shift toward a cross-disciplinary focus on social issues would return universities to their 'historic commitment to service' and

would enrich the campus, renew the communities, and give new dignity and status to the scholarship of service. [...] Undergraduates at the college would participate in field projects, relating ideas to real life. Classrooms and laboratories would be extended to include health clinics, youth centers, schools, and government offices. Faculty members would build partners with practitioners who would, in turn, come to campus as lecturers and student advisors. (quoted in Zlotkowski 1998, 1)

Research that explores the impacts of community-campus partnerships has followed this charge, focusing mostly on the practice of 'service learning'. A multitude of possible definitions have arisen for the term 'service learning' alone; Eyler and Giles note that Jan Kendall counted 147 in 1990 (1999). One of these posits that:

service-learning is a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development. Reflection and reciprocity are key concepts of service-learning. (Jacoby 2003, 3)

Others underscore that 'service, combined with learning, adds value to each and transforms both' (quoted in Stanton, Giles, and Cruz 1999, 223).

Various learning theories ground the practice of service learning, the most popular deriving from the well-known educational theorists John Dewey, Paulo Freire, and David Kolb. Dewey believed that learning is a wholehearted affair; that is, you can't sever knowing and doing, and with cycles of action and reflection, one's greatest learning occurs. Dewey was interested in the learning that resulted from the mutual exchange between people and their environment. Freire furthered these concepts by exploring the power dynamic that exists in traditional roles of teacher as the knower and student as the empty receptacle in which the teacher will deposit knowledge. He not only dismantled the inherent power dynamics in that relationship but also the idea that learning is something that is done to you, given to you, rather than something you co-create and exchange in a consciousness-raising process that involves literacy, reading, writing, action, reflection, self-awareness, relationship building, and reciprocity. Kolb's work expanded notions of experiential learning to concentrate

on the skills that observation, reflection, and analysis play in enabling students to take charge of their learning and engage in cycles of continuous learning (Stanton, Giles, and Cruz 1999).

The concept of 'knowledge in use' from theories of cognitive science state that the de-contextualized nature of the classroom act as a barrier to the development of learning; that is, active constructions of knowledge are needed vehicles for the development of learning. In this way, service learning enables opportunities for problem-solving skills to be developed 'in action', as well as emotional and social development that takes place in the cooperative-based (rather than individual-based) atmospheres of engaged scholarship. All of these theorists contend that learning is something gained through action and relationships with others, with ideas, and with one's surrounding environment; equally affected by self-knowledge and control, interpersonal relationships, community involvement, engagement with theories and literature, and the social issues of one's society. Experiential learning in the community enhances cognitive development and provides a fundamental shift 'from knowledge as self-interest and private good . . . to knowledge as civic responsibility and public work' (Boyte and Farr 1997).

Impact on student learning outcomes

Community partnerships are most successful in terms of student learning outcomes when students spend substantial time with the community partner organization and neighborhood, participating in activities, assisting in specific projects and research, relationship building with organization staff and community members, reflecting on the intersections of practice and theory in a correlating course, and contributing in a meaningful way to the long term, shared goals of social change. In most service-learning programs, students have weekly commitments to a community organization or association and receive credit (academic or work study) for their internship. The quality of placement (e.g. one that correlates with a student's interests and that is willing, able and interested in supervising a student intern) has been shown to have positive impact on student personal and interpersonal outcomes (Eyler and Giles 1999; Mabry 1998).

In addition to the weekly involvement at the site, students need a weekly classroom forum to discuss issues they confront in their internships as '...adequate time, contact, in-class reflection, and talking about service experiences make a difference in students' civic and academic outcomes' (Mabry 1998, 39). Students in the service-learning classroom then have a place in which to connect their experiences to correlating theories on social change and social problems, as well as a place to reflect on their experiences, understand the impact of their involvement, and support one another on the sensitive politics of community engagement. Research shows that critical reflection and analysis through discussion and writing assignments can secure a stronger commitment to and belief in the student's ability to make a difference in the world while enhancing prosocial reasoning (Giles and Eyler 1994). This reflection is further augmented by the collective guidance and feedback from professors and community partners whose input affects the learning, use of skills, and commitment to service of students (Greene and Diehm 1995).

In addition to the in-class reflection, another ingredient for successful community-based education is the duration and intensity of services (Austin and Sax 1998;

Mabry 1998). This combined with an application of the service to academic content (and vice versa) has an impact on students, particularly learning outcomes (Eyler and Giles 1999). I have seen this with my own students who, after immersing themselves deeply in their community sites and study of corresponding theories, produce praxis projects that have strong impact not only on their immediate learning but on their future academic and professional paths. Many students keep in touch long after their courses have ended, reporting that their majors and careers have been directly impacted by their experiences in those course internships.

In 1991, Giles, Honnet, and Migliore outlined the most frequently expressed goals of service-learning programs, which Eyler, Giles, and Braxton then used as a springboard for their analysis on the impact of service learning on college students (1997). These goals included: citizenship skills (including political action skills, communication skills, and tolerance); confidence that students can and should make a difference in their communities (which includes feeling connected to the community and believing that the community itself can be effective in solving its problems); and community-related values and perceptions of social problems and social justice (including the depth and scope of their conceptualizations of social issues, how these problems should be addressed and levels of empathy and openness to multiple viewpoints). Their studies found that service learning had successful impact on students in regard to all of these goals, with the exception of any significant impact on critical thinking or communication skills. Nonetheless, Eyler, Giles, and Braxton found that overall 'when students are directly involved with people experiencing the social problems they are studying or agencies working with these problems, they change the way they think about these issues' (p. 13).

In the mid-1990s, a burgeoning of studies developed to demonstrate the impact of service learning on student learning, such as: a demonstration of how service learning enhanced student engagement with and commitment to school (Sax and Astin 1997); a demonstration on how students in service-learning courses earned grades that were a bit higher (4.8%) than their non-service-learning counterparts (Strage 2004); a demonstration that contact with service beneficiaries appeared to be particularly relevant to both student civic and academic outcomes (Mabry 1998); a demonstration that service-based learning successfully linked the initiative to develop students' social responsibility with efforts to improve undergraduate education (Stanton 1990); and, among others, demonstrations that service learning is a powerful tool for preparing students to be contributing citizens in their broader communities (Eyler and Giles 1997; Marcus, Howard, and King 1993). These studies addressed skeptical queries about the academic rigor of experiential learning and succeeded in (slowly) expanding the borders of higher education's traditional classroom pedagogic.

Impact of the partnership in the community

With the bulk of early research on community-based education focusing on the academic, civic, and moral benefits for students, many researchers in the late 1990s problematized the paltry research that had been conducted on the ways in which communities benefit or are burdened by the involvement of faculty and students in their community work. As a result, in the last 10 years a variety of studies have been conducted to assess this impact, including, for example: in-depth evaluations of the positive and negative effects of service learning on communities and suggestions for

improvements within the community-campus partnerships (Ferrari and Worrall 2000; Gelmon et al. 1998; Jacoby 2003; Sandy 2007; Schmidt and Robby 2002; Vernon and Ward 1999); the effect on community members when involved in service-learning partnerships that are unmediated by official non-profit organizations (Jorge 2003); the ways in which communities viewed faculty involvement and knowledge production in comparison to their own (Bacon 2002); the difference between transactional service and transformational social justice partnerships and the risk of harm or loss organizations can face when engaging in service-learning partnerships (Bushouse 2005); findings demonstrating that while teaching community-based organizations how to collect and analyze data on their own promoted self-reliance and sustainability, they often did not have the time or expertise to design or execute in-depth research projects that could withstand serious scrutiny and that universities could complement existing community organizations' efforts and skills with their resources and knowledge (Strand et al. 2003); and finally, a review of studies that examined how service learning contributed to community development, how it bridged 'town and gown', how it benefited community partners, and how there is a need for future evaluations to focus on the partnership as the unit of analysis, examining consistency with good service-learning practice principles, and using the tools of action research and asset-based assessments (Cruz and Giles 2000).

Other studies have turned their focus specifically to the practice of relationship building and reciprocity with communities in service-learning programs, positing the unit of the partnership between campuses and community organizations and members as the focal point of study. Dorado and Giles (2004) suggest 'negotiated order theory' to launch this type of analysis, wherein partnerships are studied not only for assessing outcomes but for understanding the context in which actor's actions and interactions are embedded. They posit that there are three dominant behaviors/stages in partnerships: learning (gaining familiarity with partners); aligning (reviewing/assessing partnership aims, goals, process, and outcomes); and nurturing (cultivating support on a committed path of engagement). Miron and Moely (2006) suggest that the social exchange theory (wherein reciprocal actions between individuals or groups of individuals contribute to a relationship/exchange that is two sided, mutually contingent, and mutually rewarding) can be used as a lens in which to view the goals of the community-based education partnership. Using the partnership itself as a unit of study, they found that when community partners that had a voice (that is, were involved in the design, implementation and evaluation of the service-learning program) as well as had positive interpersonal relations/good communication with the campus partner, the partnership was perceived as being beneficial. Keith (1998) suggests that partnerships are most successful when they connect community service with community building; that is, partnerships that convey high levels of mutual respect and expectations, networks of support, the development of local capacities, relationship building across borders, an appreciation of the cultural and human capital and assets of each partner, a lack of disparity between partners' contributions, and a connection between service, democracy, and community building.

All of these studies provide a critical assessment of both the blessings and burdens of community-campus partnerships in making social change in local communities. The findings provide some cautions for service-learning practitioners which reveal that if done without consciousness and care, community-college partnerships can result in only short-term benefits, or worse, end up furthering the status quo and

causing more harm to the community or organization. Communities might find the limitations of disciplines and academic calendars to be too rigid and shortsighted for holistic, on-going community concerns. They might find a lack of ethics and skills orientation for students that result in students who are unprepared and insensitive when entering into and working within the dynamics of a disenfranchised community. Generally speaking, communities (and students) may be disheartened to find that service learning that is conducted without related efforts of public policy reform or social justice research and organizing can result in simply ameliorating a bad situation, not remedying it (Stanton, Giles, and Cruz 1999). These critiques have led to the study of the differences (and intersections) between charity and social justice in the realm of service learning (Bacon 2002; Calderon 2007; Kezar and Rhoads 2001; Lewis 2004; Mitchell 2008; Ward and Wolf-Wendel 2000); an area deserving further exploration so that community work forwarded by and with universities does not perpetuate the very injustices and inequalities it aims to dismantle.

The differences and intersections of charity and social justice

It seems obvious to state that genuine community building takes place on equal ground, with a nurturing and exchange of ideas from people who are leading, teaching, and learning from each other in a flow that gives and takes but does not put one above the rest. Yet, traditional notions of ‘serving’ and ‘helping’ that are inherent to service learning and volunteering can threaten the success of these exchanges. Often times a volunteer’s quest to ‘help’ marginalized communities reflects the general underlying assumptions of most service-providing agencies: that there is a void, a deficit, a need in the community (a community that is often considered poor and less educated), and that the agency (which is often considered richer and better educated) has the solutions to ‘help’ the ‘needy’. This paradigm is not meant to disempower, but often it does. There is certainly a nurturing exchange that can result from people engaging in services of palliative care. Yet when services are repeatedly given to a group that is vulnerable, marginalized, or powerless, the service itself (however, well-intended) can end up perpetuating this population’s position of vulnerability, marginalization, and powerlessness. When no correlating efforts are made to radically shift structural power dynamics in our society, a never-ending cycle of interlocking social and medical services becomes systematically exercised with marginalized communities, until it is established as the norm. Power is given up (or taken) when this norm is such that only another (usually an outsider, with more resources and perhaps a different cultural or value system) is seen as the vehicle to rescue certain populations from their devastation. Dependence is born and a power dynamic is developed between those who have and give and those who do not have and take; a dynamic that does not reflect reciprocity and interconnectedness, but rather a thinly veiled assumption of superiority and inferiority. Further, this interdependence is entangled in an economic system that benefits from the continued need for service – for example, the USA has experienced a relatively rapid shift in economic production away from goods to services – today the economy relies on the need for people to need services. In just 120 years, the national economy has flipped from 80% goods production to 80% service production (McKnight 1995). As one scholar bluntly states: ‘... the most “economically productive” citizen is a cancer patient who totals his car on the way to meet with his divorce lawyer’ (McKibben 2007, 28). The USA is

a country that is now economically dependent on one sector of the national community (usually the poor or sick or oppressed) being in need so that another sector (usually the middle class, the healthy, and the privileged) can find employment in servicing those needs, with little attention paid to the intersections of race, class, and ethnicity that divide which groups are typically in need and which are typically with the power to dole out the services. My country is one that prides itself on the notion of 'doing good' or 'helping' without recognizing the potentially harmful ways in which our help can perpetuate a paralysis of entire communities into being needy recipients of services, not exemplars of self-reliance and interconnected agents of social uplift. This rescuer-saves-victim dynamic is deeply engrained in the political, economic, and value system promoted by our government, reflected in large ways through our imperialist-laden history and reflected in small ways through the assumptions of well-meaning activists and engaged scholars.

This philosophy is echoed by students who come to service-learning courses saying, 'I want to change the world'; 'I just want to help'; and sometimes 'I want to know those people'. Usually the intention is not the problem, the impact is. As one of my colleagues exclaimed, 'Lord help the community from the good deeds of students!' By this I believe he meant that despite their good intentions, students can end up doing more harm than good when entering a community with the notion that they are there to help, rescue, save the poor, needy, and marginalized with their gifts of formal education (read: superior knowledge), resources, and ways of being. The claim 'I want to change the world' implies that you know how and your belief in how to do so is right, despite the possibility that those people who need help may not want anything to do with your ideas of change. Without usually recognizing it, students can perpetuate the very circumstances of marginalization and disempowerment by stepping into this work unarmed with consciousness regarding these potential dynamics.

I say potential because I still believe that there are authentically respectful ways in which outsiders can work with communities on issues of cultural affirmation and social uplift that do not feed cycles of hierarchical damage and disempowerment. I reject the tendency to create a false binary between 'service' and 'social justice', as the findings of my own research on this topic continue to show that, if done critically, service work can result in deeply informing student involvement in social change and political activism. One example of this is evident in my study of the impact of students doing service-learning internships at a local day labor center, wherein I have found that both the migrant laborers and the college students benefit greatly from their authentic exchange of skills, culture, and friendship, resulting in changed beliefs, values, and assumptions about the 'other'. Yet I have also found that the student-initiated English language development classes, health clinics, murals, and gardens at the day labor center do not significantly alter the exploitation and discrimination day laborers face in their status as undocumented immigrants in the USA. The bridge between service work (and its interpersonal, social benefits) and social change (and its collective, political benefits) is built once these students and day laborers stand side by side in street rallies and city council meetings, together demanding human rights for immigrants in local policy and practice. And without the levels of investment and trust that are developed in their relationships during those English language development classes, health clinics, and collaborative art and gardening efforts, the impetus and commitment to lobbying for this social change may not occur. Thus, it is imperative to recognize the limits and cautionary zones of service learning, while also

exploring how community-based education programs can move short-term, transactional service-oriented internships to transformational, social justice efforts with long-term advocacy goals.

With greater numbers of students involved in experiential learning in their communities, the larger levels of awareness not only can alter the political landscape but can also expand the possibilities within the university landscape. Knowledge production typically has occurred within an intellectual vacuum in higher education, establishing clear divides between the knowers (the scientists, experts, and intellectuals) and the known (the community members seen as an object of study, not a source of knowledge). Through critical community engagement the tables can be turned so that community members are seen as not only a source of knowledge, but as esteemed teachers and mentors providing insightful analysis and leadership in the trajectory of a student's education. My undergraduates tell me that in our service-learning program with incarcerated youth they learn more from the wards' personal narratives about the intricacies of being raised in poverty, gangs, and institutions (foster care and juvenile detention facilities) than from all their theoretical readings that aim to explain the same phenomena. Critically transforming the pedagogy of higher education to include marginalized voices as 'experts' in their own right not only pries open a previously exclusive trend of scholarship but expands students' understanding of ways of knowing, being, and seeing the world. Revamping the traditions of knowledge production so that local knowledge is seen as a valid and an intellectually rigorous source of learning significantly alters the social, cultural, and political landscape of knowledge production in the university, which is indeed a crucial type of social change. Furthermore, this knowledge and the relationships behind it inspire students to move beyond their service work to address structural changes required in the interlocking systems that perpetuate the need for more services.

In order to expand the possibilities of how service can fit into or lead into local acts of social justice activism, a critically conscious praxis of community engagement must be fostered by those facilitating service-learning programs. Doing so means building sustainable relationships with local community members and agencies and creating service-learning and community-based research partnerships based on their long-term interests. In the short term it means involving community partners in the course curriculum and instruction so that students understand the social problems faced in that community (as well as the assets grounded in that community) by someone of that community, representing the validity of knowledge that is indigenous to that place. The community must be seen and treated as an equal partner in the exchange of knowledge, service, time, and resources; each partner (students, community members, and professors) should be giving and receiving in different ways as they are able, creating a balanced sense of reciprocity. Larger goals of community building and social change must be kept at the forefront of the work and not be lost in the time constraints of the university's academic calendar or desire to do only immediately gratifying service providing. Student learning objectives should be clearly developed and incorporated in the partnerships (and later evaluated) in a way that still allows for new and unexpected learning outcomes to flourish. Students should be guided to participate as volunteers in the community in ways that authentically respect and support the interests and equality of its members so that goals are forwarded of mutual support and learning rather than top-down 'helping' or 'rescuing' of the

'needy'. Additionally, critically analyzing the existing structural inequalities that have forwarded the need of outsiders entering into a community to conduct services must be integrated into classroom and community discussions. Asset-based community development (that is, supporting communities to build on their own strengths, talents, and networks in order to negate the need for outside services to build them up) can be incorporated into community-based education programs as an alternative to the traditional service-providing paradigm (McKnight 1995). Consistent relationship building, communication, and assessment regarding the interests, needs, strengths, and goals of each partner will help these aims to become actualized and result in a successful partnership of engaged scholarship.

Local/global connections

A final critique and opportunity for service learning is presented through the local/global link. Bored by what students see as the relatively good conditions of most in the USA compared to the poverty of many in developing countries, many students take their desires to 'help' or 'change the world' abroad. To actualize that potential abroad, however, these students need to understand the powerful contradiction that underlies going out to 'do good' in developing countries that may have been harmed significantly in the first place by your nation's policies. Local practices of engaged scholarship provide an opportunity for students to make an intellectual and political link between local and global community engagement, recognizing that often students can have the greatest impact through local activism in effecting the problems that have leaked across borders and resulted in many of the foreign miseries they are enticed to go attend to abroad.

This sentiment was reiterated when my students asked a sweatshop labor-rights advocate in Mexico what they, as US activists and scholars, could do to support his group's struggle against the egregious worker rights violations committed by transnational factory employers. Without skipping a beat, he said:

Stay home. Work on ending your own country's racism, sexism, and imperialism. Globalization is the new imperialism. You can help us by staying home and working with your own corporations and government. Get rid of that president of yours that keeps us in war. You see, at least in Mexico we know we are poor and that we aren't living in a democracy. In the United States, you live under the illusion that you are living in a democracy. (Anonymous advocate, 5 April 2008, Tijuana, Mexico)

As I translated his assertions to the class, I could see the shock, guilt, and lastly understanding flash across my students' faces. I believe, for the first time really, they began to problematize the romantic notion of going 'out there' to do good without first seeing what's to be done at home to prevent further harm 'out there'. This does not mean that abroad learning experiences are politically incorrect or unimportant; on the contrary, the social, cultural, emotional, and intellectual education that is available to students who study abroad speaks to the power of experiential education outside of one's own comfort zone. The opportunities to expand horizons and familiarity with other cultures and ways of being in the world that is afforded in abroad programs is significant, as evidenced by their popularity (70% of students at my college study abroad, a fact about which students, administration, and faculty are all very proud). Nonetheless, eye-opening experiences abroad can and should be channeled into

community engagement (locally or internationally) so that there is a mutual reciprocity between individual benefits and those of the communities we visit. As students return home, their heightened awareness of the ways in which social issues affect marginalized populations abroad can be brought back and put to use in the local campus community. Students can make the connection between getting involved in local community–campus partnerships that better their immediate surroundings as well as have direct consequences for the global communities that are affected by the actions, (and inactions) of the US citizenry. They can become more aware of and responsible for ways in which local community-building strategies and resistance to certain practices and policies in the USA can have a greater effect than moving to another country and trying to ‘fix’ their problems. Local community engagement programs offer a way to engage with local and global social, environmental, economic, political, and cultural problems in a way that is sustainable and truly enables students to ‘think globally and act locally’.

Obviously, the conclusions drawn here are based on the western, urban model of service learning I am familiar with in the USA. As a place-based practice, the cultural and political nuances of each place undoubtedly alter the ways in which the primary concepts of service, learning, charity, social justice, experiential learning pedagogy, and community-based research are interpreted and played out. The dynamics, tensions, successes, and challenges of engaged scholarship within rural, indigenous, non-western, more conservative, or more radical communities will undoubtedly change the ways in which the lived experience of community engagement is perceived and enacted. Nonetheless, I believe there are universal questions regarding how institutions of higher education interact with, support, counteract, and engage the social problems of their local communities, regardless of national location. Whatever is considered local or global to this paper’s reader, these questions pose an invitation to critically re-configure teaching techniques to include alternative forms of knowledge production, signaling a radical expansion of conventional pedagogical theory and practice.

Conclusion

As evident from the studies and examples explored here, not only is the practice of engaged scholarship growing, but so too are the inquiries as to how it can be actualized in ways that critically re-invent paradigms of service learning so that assets rather than deficits of a community are strengthened in reciprocal and respectful community–campus partnerships. As community members’ local knowledge is appreciated as a source of knowledge production, students’ experiential service learning is seen as containing academic integrity, the educational objectives of universities prioritize participating in the communities they are a part of, and various degrees of community building result in local neighborhoods, the general conditions of teaching and learning in higher education are critically re-imagined and transformed, as are the strategies for social change. To be engaged both in the study of social problems and the envisioning of possible solutions in the company of scholars and activists in our local communities, we learn a great deal about ourselves, our neighbors, our capacities for change and the kinds of strategies that might lead us there. In nurturing our diverse communities, we aim to move beyond the confines

of the academy or insular organizational interests as we imagine a new world into being and actively collaborate in its creation.

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