Community Development Education

Practice Insights From Around the World
When members of the volunteer Beltzhoover Neighborhood Council approached us in 2008, they represented one of several dozen low-income Pittsburgh communities struggling with five decades of industrial and population decline and persistent inequality. The Council wasn’t looking to dwell on its troubles. Instead, members were intent on leveraging the community’s substantial reserves of talent and passion. Their focus was across an array of physical and environmental challenges, from neglected public infrastructure and ecosystems to the recently closed elementary school. The citizens of Beltzhoover (population 1,900) wanted pleasant, tree-lined streets with functional sidewalks and access to transit, the same as the city’s more affluent communities. They wanted to revive the green grocer–bakery, community center, and playground. And they saw the neighborhood’s +30% residential lot vacancy—the upshot of cycles of economic decline, disinvestment, and landlord indifference—more as resource than blight.

Beyond Service-Learning

At the same time, I was about to reprise the advanced Pittsburgh-based studio that I had led in the 1990’s. Influenced by my research in Sub-Sahara Africa on anticipatory community learning and adaptation in the face of climate change, I resolved that the 2008 studio would engage collaboratively with at-risk, under-served communities. As it happened, the Beltzhoover studio would be facilitated through the new Penn State Center (Pittsburgh’s “community connector”) as its first pilot project. And it would push well beyond the usual service-learning model.

As with many public land-grant institutions in the U.S., service-learning at Penn State had long been standard fare. Typically, planning and design faculty would approach a local official with an offer of technical services provided by a class of 30-40 students. After a formal memorandum of understanding was signed and a budget set, the design process would take place entirely within the confines of campus. Creative interactions with stakeholders were rare. Service-learning’s main purpose, then, was to expose students to the client-consultant model of acquiring technical experience as efficiently as possible. Inherently a clean and one-way proposition, possibilities for mutually-beneficial discovery and growth were never likely.

Studio Overview

In contrast, the goal for the 2008 Pittsburgh Studio was a mutually beneficial process of engaged design-in-place—students and community participants working collaboratively. Importantly, we were invited, and the Penn State Center was the match-maker. Formalities were limited to a handshake. Since that first Beltzhoover experience, the course has become a Fall semester fixture. Fifteen weeks in length, it directly partners 12-14 upper-year students with local citizen groups in one or two Pittsburgh neighborhoods. To date, we have partnered with 22 communities, most of them low-income and economically distressed.

The Pittsburgh studio now plays out “…community design as primarily vested in the community. Solutions emerge from the local, rather than being miraculously delivered as gifts or commodities from elsewhere” (Tamminga and DeCiantis, 2012). Our focus on neighborhood-scale assets have included detailed concepts for
civic spaces, green infrastructure, public art networks, urban farms, vacant lot recycling, convivial main streets, and adaptive reuse of civic buildings. Throughout, we are reminded by our local partners that projects should seek to catalyze social entrepreneurship and employment from within.

Students and partners interact primarily through on-site meetings to conduct analysis, relate back-stories, and pin down place-based issues and opportunities. Back on campus, I introduce students to participatory techniques, focusing on ways that students can promote both analytical and imaginal literacy in their neighborhood partners.

A mid-semester design workshop marks the transition from research and analysis to site programming, conceptualization, and form-giving. With workshop ideas as grist, an extended period of iterative design exploration, testing, and visualization follows. This phase demands that students exert their full design skills, while regularly calling on community partners (now fast friends) to review their work or supply further insights. Finally, a public presentation and open house is hosted in the neighborhood. The projects are finalized, compiled as a portfolio, and made publicly available online. Community partners continue meeting with Penn State Center staff to explore implementation strategies.

The Practice-Theory Dialogue

While the pedagogy of the studio evolved mostly experientially, it has been influenced by several scholarly strands. Its learning-by-doing sensibility is in the constructivist tradition of David Lebow (1993, p.6) who called for practical community-based scholarship “…firmly embedded in the social and emotional contexts in which learning takes place.” The studio’s activist leaning was spurred by conversations with Penn State colleagues, Associate Dean of Outreach, Craig Weidemann, and geographer, Lakshman Yapa, both at the forefront of the public scholarship movement. Additionally, learning theorist Étienne Wenger’s writings on communities of practice deepened our awareness of the importance of direct working relationships between community partners and students. The Pittsburgh Studio built on these notions, scaffolding up from conventional knowledge-building to transformative levels of empathy, vision, and creativity.

Intangible and Tangible Outcomes

Each Fall semester, community partners remark that the most important consequence of their Pittsburgh Studio involvement is coming to know the power of design. They see how the half-dozen or so project proposals can collectively result in a shared vision for regenerative priorities in their neighborhood.

Since most of our students come from suburban or small-town places in the mid-Atlantic, there’s an essential acclimation period during which they reconcile issues of “otherness”, make friends, and dive into the productive rhythm of working relationships. During in-class reflections, students often share feelings of humility at knowing less about the place they’re studying than their local partners, while, at the same time, reveling in their designers’ role as form-givers.

The more tangible outcomes of the Pittsburgh Studio are many and varied. The 22 partner communities usually continue their relationship with Penn State Center post-studio. Typically, actionable projects tend toward follow-up planning grants and improvements to civic spaces and community landscapes. At the other end of the spectrum, our 2009 Larimer village center and green infrastructure proposals were at the core of a successful $30 million grant application for Choice Neighborhood program funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

On the academic side, the studio was the subject of a documentary short film produced by WPSU Public Broadcasting Service and shown widely on campus. The film, along with several presentations I made to the Council of Engaged Scholarship, were influential in Penn State’s recent creation of the Office of Student Engagement Network.
In 2011, the studio was awarded the W.K. Kellogg Foundation Engagement Award–Northeast Region from the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities, and was national Finalist for the Peter C. Magrath University/Community Engagement Award. Finally, ours was one of 74 Exemplars of Engaged Scholarship recognized by Campus Compact, a national coalition of 1,000+ colleges and universities committed to building democracy through civic education and community development.

Community-engaged studios are messy, sometimes fraught, and always exhilarating. They provide an inclusive, creative space for community partners and students alike to experience the power of democratic design. My hope is that this kind of public scholarship continues emerging as a meaningful contributor to community development practice. To help, here are guidelines for practitioners and academics considering a similar approach:

• Establish working relationships early. Pre-planning is vital in reconciling community needs with pedagogical goals.

• Recognize place-based design as a valid component of community development practice. Assert that design is an essential human endeavor in which all should participate.

• Discuss realities of power, privilege and exclusion. Nurture (pre)professional humility and pluralistic understanding in students.

• Think small. A compact student team of about 10-15 is best. Then ensure six or seven dedicated key community partner-mentors to achieve a 2:1 student/partner ratio.

• Affirm the public scholarship principles of reciprocal learning and co-generated solutions.

• Avoid the parochial discipline trap. Privilege direct student interactions with local residents/content experts over bureaucrats and professionals.

• Pass the baton. Relational continuity between community and institution is vital in moving ideas into action. Community connectors like the Penn State Center are essential in facilitating pre- and post-studios activities, while affording faculty space to teach.

• Be patient. During a 2017 public meeting on community improvements, Beltzhoover residents voiced concern over a lack of anticipated spin-off jobs, while citing our studio’s 2008 work as the impetus to designing with local residents (Kramer, 2017). Remember, tangible results can take time to ferment.

• Reflect. Discuss ways the studio is personally relevant to students, and how it might influence future career choices and modes of practice. Close the feedback loop by conducting post-studio evaluation with key partners and community connector.

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References
