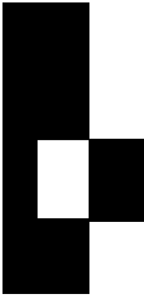

Drawing On the Local: Collaboration and Community Expertise

Linda Flower
Carnegie Mellon University
Shirley Brice Heath
Stanford University

A short history of community/university collaboration is buried in the phrase "service learning." In the grammar of its implied narrative, the agent, actor, and source of expertise—the server—is the academy not the community. And the act of learning is more often a personal reflection by students on a broadening experience than it is a public act of shared knowledge making. But what if we attempted to turn the tables: to transform service into a collaboration with communities and learning into a problem-driven practice of mutual inquiry and literate action? And what would it take to do so?

Our reflection on this issue comes in part from watching these questions come to life in an unusual forum—a community problem-solving dialogue with 180 stakeholders, including leaders in the urban community, leaders and staff from city youth organizations, and university faculty and students. This event, *Drawing on the Local: Carnegie Mellon and Community Expertise,* framed the problem in this way: How do we first acknowledge, then draw on and at the same time nurture and give voice to community expertise (where "we" refers to universities, faculty and students engaged in service learning)?[1]

The structure of a community problem-solving dialogue invites participants to explore open questions by mounting an active search for rival hypotheses grounded in multiple and alternative ways of knowing. Consider, as this group did, some of the more general answers posed by the traditions of philanthropy, the settlement house movement, and progressive education.

Supporting Urban Communities

One answer the philanthropic tradition offers us is, "If you want to help, give money and stay home." The traditional model of philanthropy has those with wealth giving their money and remaining distant from the context in which it is spent. However, many foundations, particularly

 DOI: 10.37514/LLD-J.2000.4.3.04

family foundations, increasingly want to be involved with the organizations they support and to share benefits of their expertise in management, finance, and marketing. The newly wealthy who have made their fortunes in knowledge industries have come to know their greatest assets rest in people and not in buildings or equipment. Therefore, they often tap quickly into the idea of viewing community expertise as a valued resource.

This resonates with the answer traditionally offered by the settlement house movement, which has been, "Move in." In Jane Addams' early nineteenth-century Hull House, university-based social activists literally settled in inner city settlement houses and became part of the life of the community. In contemporary versions of "moving in," actors, artists, and dancers, writers, researchers and entrepreneurs locate their work in the community, supporting its sense of its own identity (cf. Ball and Heath, 1993). College faculty and students can indeed enter the life of the community through participation in these enterprises, through music and athletics, through community churches. However, this level of metaphorical "moving in" is most likely to occur if one has first had an experience of genuine mutuality—an experience which service learning could potentially provide (cf. Deans, in press).

The tradition of progressive education and inquiry, articulated by John Dewey (1916), extended by the prophetic pragmatism of Cornel West (1993) offers yet another answer which is, "Take action and inquire—together." The problem-posing, problem-solving temper of this stance emphasizes the agency and expertise of the community—especially the marginalized knowledge of the young and the struggling. It argues that without jointly set goals and an expanded definition of expertise, both service and learning will miss the mark (Cushman, 1998; Flower, 1997). The challenge this poses for students and faculty is not simply how to hear this local expertise, that may come to us in a language, argument style, or discourse we find unfamiliar or even discomforting. The problem is also how to construct a transformative understanding, that has some power to change both learners and the world they find.

The Problem—As Community/University Partners May See It

If any clear consensus emerged during the Drawing On the Local dialogue, it was that such collaboration is not the norm. Moreover, when genuine knowledge-making becomes a goal of service learning, it demands some changes in attitude and standard university MOs to produce it. From this starting point, the dialogue became an inquiry into just what it does take to build this relationship to community expertise. The panel and the audience were invited, as partners in a community problem-solving dialogue, to pose "rival hypotheses" from their distinctive points of view.

The University's Vice Provost for Education, Indira Nair began by locating the conflict close to home: drawing on local expertise means stepping outside our disciplinary discourses.

> At Carnegie Mellon—we call ourselves the problem solving university—the interdisciplinarity comes because no problem comes in little chunks. But one discipline we sometimes forget is the discipline of understanding knowledge that is packaged differently from the kind of packaging we do for class.[2] In the community you can find that local knowledge—in my country we call it indigenous knowledge—that is embedded perhaps in a different language, a different kind of consciousness, a different kind of environment.

If a "change in consciousness" weren't enough, inquiry also demands a capacity for risk-taking. We had launched this dialogue with a dramatic documentary of entrepreneurial and artistic success by urban youth. In Shirley Brice Heath's Art*Show,* young people in "at-risk" neighborhoods and rural communities are initiating arts projects and learning to sustain their own organizations. But in the discussion she quickly pointed out:

> The community involvement you saw in Art*Show* involves considerable risk. What the young man talking about the bagel factory didn't tell you on camera was that he used to come down and steal equipment and supplies at night, until he found out that these people were really committed. So one hypothesis is that you must be prepared to take risks and take chances and have expectations of something that's going to come at the end, for a very diverse community.

While educators and scholars in this dialogue were directing our attention outward and down the road, voices from the community were also gently reminding us that new relationships are always built within an existing social history. If we do not consciously flip the script of that history, we may unconsciously reenact it. Pennsylvania Supreme Court Judge Justin Johnson saw the issue from a perspective of unusual balance as distinguished Judge, a Life Trustee of the University, and one of the city's most deeply respected African-American leaders. He was clearly familiar with the narrative in which college students are there to "impart their skills and knowledge:"

> For me, it's sort of like going back to integration, where you regularly heard people say, "Oh, what a great thing that Black children now can go to school with White children." And no one wanted to admit the fact that White children were getting an awful lot of important stuff by being in school with Black children.

The director of a large, dynamic inner city YMCA, Paul Stoney, seemed to be speaking from experience as well:

> You can't come in with a very "look down your nose" attitude, or as if institutions don't have a history. Because our institutions, like the YMCA which has been on the same corner for 80 years, are very adept at smelling out an opportunity that is a one-way situation. . . . Those children can tell whether or not someone is sincere and whether or not there's going to be any continuity.

According to this rival hypothesis, collaboration depends not just on an attitude but the more demanding action of continuity—it's the staying power that builds trust. Ironically, it was the dynamic leader of the city's Urban League, Esther Bush, who pointed out the often overlooked consequence continuity could have for university partners: Building connections without collaborative engagement may create unreliable knowledge.

> I have been contracted by several universities saying can you identify some clients to participate in this or that research project . . . . Before I came to Pittsburgh I worked in Harlem. And in Harlem I would park my car and the drug dealers would watch it for me. My car never got touched, cause I earned their trust. You go into a community and you build trust. You give them something they need, and they watch you in terms of consistency.
>
> That's totally different from going in, doing a research project that's gonna benefit you and what is it doing for them? Typically nothing. Maybe five or ten dollars when they sit down and have a conversation with you. But they're not really committed; they're getting the five or ten dollars. So how good is your study really?

Bush's comment speaks to the university's identity as a knowledge maker. The Director of Pittsburgh's Community House, Wayne Peck, spoke to its heart when he asked:

> Where does the university weigh in and make common cause for suffering? . . . No one would question the competence of Carnegie Mellon in making new knowledge, but how does it weigh with its knowledge to get things done in urban neighborhoods as well?

Judge/Trustee/Community Leader Justin Johnson replies:

> Maybe I shouldn't get into what he's asking, because it could be embarrassing. He's really not asking about whether the university is going to teach young people about being good citizens, but to what degree will the university be a good citizen. . . . I've seen situations where . . . the answer is, "well, you know Pittsburgh's a conservative city," which is not an acceptable answer.

Community problem-solving dialogues of this size are more likely to open questions and pose problems than resolve them. But the groundedness and specificity of the rival hypotheses emerging in the room suggested that people had indeed been wrestling with these questions on their own. The diverse (if complementary) rivals as to what was at stake, on the other hand, revealed the roots of problems service-learning initiatives can encounter if they aren't attuned to the rival readings the "served" may bring to this relationship. Such rivals call us to imagine solutions that are accountable to an expanded and intercultural vision of the problem. For instance, this dialogue suggests that sustainability is not bought with the coin of good intentions. It demands risk taking that goes beyond stepping off campus to deliberately stepping outside one's own discourse and conceptual frameworks. And it calls for reciprocity in multiple forms: in recognizing the history and contributions of community institutions, in commitment to a relationship not defined by a one semester project, and in a respect for community expertise that is expressed in the active practice of dialogue.

In the next section we sketch two case studies of project-based collaboration that demonstrate different ways of trying to address these issues and to build relationships that respect, nurture and draw on local expertise. One case foregrounds the kinds of literacy learning that go on when youth themselves direct a research/performance project. In the other, college students enter an intercultural inquiry in which their analyti-

cal, literate, and technological skills are used in the service of community expertise.

The Art*Show* Case

By the early 1990s, community organizations based largely in the energy, imagination, and knowledge of local youth began to realize their future depended on finding ways to add capital to their financial base. A pattern of nonprofit organizations with for-profit arms began to develop as various kinds of community groups worked to develop services and products they could market.

Illustrated here is one such group from within a Boys and Girls Club. The drama team of the Club decided to shift their emphasis away from merely providing theatre for entertainment to developing interactive theatre that could work for educational and counseling purposes within a range of organizations of their region. This shift of format called for building a strong base of new knowledge and skills and working collaboratively with the public and private sectors of their area. The youth argued that the kind of project they wanted to develop would tie them closely to the "real world" of professions and would enable them to foster the idea among adults that young people could and would work with authority in a wide range of roles and topic areas.

The process they followed placed responsibility on the drama team to determine three issues of peak concern in their communities and to study in every way possible the domains of expertise and knowledge related to these concerns. For example, if the introduction of new types of illegal drugs was a growing concern, the study sessions of the young people included neurobiologists, chemists, law enforcement personnel, social workers, and physicians of psychiatry. If a growing problem within the region was parental neglect and sexual abuse of young children, different professionals would be called in to work with the drama team to introduce them to psychological theories, penalties imposed in various states, links between parental abuse and socioeconomic level, etc.

The drama team began a new season at the beginning of each summer. Over several weeks of the summer, the drama team worked with these experts to understand their three issues from every conceivable angle and then began to develop a drama through which they could bring audiences to a tense edge of understanding. The young people developed the script collaboratively as well as the descriptions and promotional materials about their work. They began by the end of the summer to visit service organizations, such as juvenile detention centers, parent support groups, drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs, schools, and the city's convention planning center. They promoted their program as one for which these

groups would pay a fee for three hours of production and interactive involvement with the audiences.

Local groups began to see the value not simply in the dramatic productions of the drama team, but in the two segments of activity that followed each drama. Once the original drama reached a high point of tension, the group broke the action, turned their backs to the audience, waited a moment, and then turned to address in character audience members as individuals. Young people left the stage or platform to move in and among audience members as they talked and asked questions about the bases of their character's actions and beliefs. When tension rose to a peak, they snapped their fingers again, turned their backs on the audience for a moment, and then turned to address the audience as individual members around the question of "what did it feel like to play that part?" "What in my experience enabled me to get inside the skin of an abusive parent, a mom who denies that her boyfriend is sexually abusing her nine-year-old daughter?"

The openings for service learning show up when we look at the kinds of collaborative partners these groups work with, the dialogue sessions they create, and the range of forms of writing, reading, planning, and strategy-building they do.[3]

The first point to notice here is a twist on idea of service. These groups are working to provide service, yes, but it is also education and counseling on a contractual basis for groups that typically pay adult-only consulting firms for similar services. It is important to recognize that service is a hot commodity and that it makes more sense to pay young people for the services they offer in education and counseling than it does to pay adults. Moreover, such pay amounts to a community organization investment, for the fees go back into the nonprofit organization to enable them to sustain their work over several years without being donor dependent.

As more and more community youth organizations develop for-profit arms of their nonprofit organizations, the young members find themselves involved in what it takes to run a business, keep track of accounts and alterations in specific contracts, maintain files on who is and who is not licensed, and schedule performances. Computer science students or business students from local colleges often work side-by-side with the young people who have a familiarity with the task that has to be done, but do not have sufficient calculating skills or familiarity with the legalese of official documents. Often young college students come into these organizations to work on a single set of technical skills with particular individuals who can develop a level of proficiency sufficient to enable them to become the organization's inside expert.

The second twist on the idea of service here is that enabling young people both to know and to transmit knowledge about such matters increases the possibility that information will be put into action. Critical in the program just described is the fact that universities and other forms of higher education helped the drama group find the experts necessary to ensure the young actors had substantive information to back their performances. Experts across a variety of fields came several days during the summer before each fall season to introduce their field and prepare the young people to take tests covering this material. Physicians, mental health clinicians, pathologists, and members of crime investigation units, religious leaders, as well as juvenile judges and probation officers, came to teach and discuss with the students. These experts gave of their knowledge, but they expected the young actors to give as well: to pass on this information to others in dramatic form and to lead sensitive insightful discussions with the groups for whom they performed. For many audiences, university experts could not have gotten either information or persuasive arguments across. Young actors could—for many groups that would never listen to adult experts.

These young people became conveyors of technical knowledge through their dramatic productions, and they gained in each performance information that made their interpretations and their audience interactions more life-like. The youth looked to university personnel for technical information that enabled the actors to gain respect from groups, such as youth offenders, with whom they could win no respect without a full knowledge, from medical and neurobiological terminology to slang terms for processing or using drugs, for example.

Other youth groups found similar ways to ensure that technical and background knowledge surrounded the work of their art. A visual arts group might strike up a trade between their studio and a graduate program in business. Young artists would sell their tee shirts at the business school, and business school students would volunteer a few hours each week to help young artists learn marketing and finance skills.

Reciprocity was the key in these university-community youth group interactions. Uniformly, youth groups rejected the idea that outsiders, such as university students or professors, came to their community organization to "service" them as needy youth. Instead, when a partnership of give-and-take worked out, both sides benefited. Getting people together to have discussions about what each group could contribute began to uncover these expectations and the diverse "stories behind the story" each group brought to the collaboration. It also led to marked changes in attitude on the part of both parties. University personnel invariably wanted to "reach out to help" community youth organizations, while the latter yearned for ways to show their expertise, energy, and value in meaningful

ways to audiences they did not normally reach. Reciprocity ensured sustained interest and involvement on the part of youth and sometimes worked wonders in changing the views that university students had about "at-risk" communities and their residents—especially their young people.

The Community Think Tank Case

In this case we see the knowledge-producing power of intercultural problem-solving. The scene is an 80-year-old, inner city community house known for its focus on learning, writing and technology (Peck, Flower, & Higgins, 1995). A majority of the folks seated at the five round tables come from the urban community. Some have known first-hand the experience of being a youth "on the street" with little direction, or a woman in the uncertain transition from welfare. Others work in social agencies, community development groups, churches, community-based organizations, or service institutions—places where they have become part of a professional and/or personal network of support for people moving from the culture of struggling urban schools and neighborhoods to a changing culture of work. And still others at the table speak for the business world as human resource staff, managers, and executives.

Everyone here is part of a university-initiated "Community Think Tank" designed to bring a wider knowledge base into the discussion of workforce development—into policy talk as well as the daily decisions that shape the practice of education, social support, or human resource management. Participants are sharing interpretations of the conflicts they see within a scenario built on the stories of inexperienced workers. The scenario shows new employees (and managers) confronting paradigmatic problems, from dealing with customers and technology, to reading tacit expectations and conquering fears. The scenarios go beyond the familiar issues of transportation and childcare to raise problems of intercultural understanding, often coded as showing *respect*, having (or lacking) *a work ethic*, understanding *teamwork*, seeing *opportunities* to progress. Working through scene by scene, these community-based participants help articulate the "story-behind-the-story" from multiple points of view: how does this new employee, her manager, or her co-worker actually interpret this event? What sorts of socially or culturally based assumptions, what bodies of situated knowledge do each bring to making sense and making decisions? The table works as a group of strategic planning partners, helping each other generate and elaborate a set of significant rival hypotheses (Flower, Long, Higgins, 2000).

Later, when each table shares its rival readings with the room, the difference stimulates more possibilities and a deeper analysis of the problem itself—what is the problem, according to whom? Are managers and

employees, for instance, living in the same narrative, making sense in the same ways?

The Community Think Tank holds a series of these Story-Behind-the-Story sessions, building a realistically complex knowledge base around recurring situations (that the literature in workforce development and human resources often defines as problems in the attitudes, preparation, or basic skills *of the employee alone*). However, unlike most accounts found in management policy, statistical analysis, training manuals, or management lore, this problem analysis includes the logic of the underprepared employee and the rival readings available from the employee and his or her network of community support.

These Story-Behind-the-Story sessions are, however, not the first step in the work of the Community Think Tank, because the process actually begins with the legwork and listening of college students. Students in a community outreach course laid the groundwork for dialogue by holding what are called "critical incident interviews" with waitresses, busboys, managers, food service workers, cleaning staff, nursing aides. Using these stories in tandem with the academic literature, the academic team developed the scenarios around sets of frequently mentioned and strongly felt issues, such as competing notions of "teamwork," and what constitutes "respect," or how one should deal with mistakes or failures.

Background research creates the blueprints for scenarios. Story-Behind-the-Story sessions interpret those barebones, building an expanded, diverse knowledge base of significant rivals. To prepare for the final stage in the process, the Decision Point sessions, the academic team then translates this rich discussion into a Decision Point Briefing Book. The challenge here is to treat cultural difference as a resource, not a problem, to name and analyze the emerging issues, and to explore ways to represent this knowledge in print and multi-media so that it informs the upcoming series of sessions.

When the Decision Point sessions convene, the participants include a greater proportion of people in workforce policy, human resources, training and management. Their job is to envision better action plans in light of the expanded knowledge base of the Briefing Book. However, as Swan (1999) discovered in her study with a public policy class, the revealing rivals students do indeed "hear" may still drop out of the public story written to policy makers, if writers can not figure out how to "translate" or integrate that knowledge into the discourse of decision makers.

So in these Decision Point sessions the participants once again turn to a literate strategy for naming key decision points and generating "options and outcomes." In this atmosphere of collaborative rivaling, community expertise plays a critical role in testing options, by projecting pos-

sible and probable outcomes from a vantage point decision makers rarely possess.

The academic teams face a new literate challenge as well: How do you translate this dynamic event into action plans and texts that can speak with good standing within the discourses of education, social service, and management decision making? And how do you create hand-held and on-line texts that invite readers to experience in some way the *process* of a community problem-solving dialogue and embrace the ways situated, local knowledge challenges, contextualizes, and radically conditionalizes familiar, establishment practices?

The premise of this Community Think Tank is that the university serves the community by becoming a working partner in a project that not only acknowledges and nurtures community expertise but commits us to an extended, strategic effort to draw on that expertise in the pursuit of transformative understanding. The educational premise is that service learning can prepare students to enter a diverse society and workplace with a respect for knowledge and discourses not their own, with intellectual and literate tools for listening, and with a commitment to building transformative knowledges out of that diversity.[4]

We see these two cases as ways to challenge some traditional assumptions about where expertise "naturally" resides in a community/university relationship and how knowledge is constructed (and by whom) in these collaborative projects. Projects like these open the door to a research-based look at the sophisticated literate learning and negotiated meaning making that can emerge in youth-scripted performance and problem-posing projects. They suggest ways college students from across the disciplines can use the methods of intercultural inquiry to build working partnerships and to create service learning projects that draw on and nurture community expertise.

But perhaps more importantly, our dialogue with the community asserts that a sustainable relationship with learning at its core must be built on a thoroughgoing respect for the knowledge of others—embodied in the social and literate practices that actively seek alternative ways of reading the world.

References

Ball, A., & Heath, S. B. (1993). Dances of identity. In S. B. Heath, & M. W. McLaughlin (Eds.*), Identity and inner-city youth: Beyond ethnicity and gender* (pp. 69-93). New York: Teachers College Press.

Cushman. E. (1998). *The struggle and the tools: Oral and literate strategies in an inner city community.* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Deans, T. (In press). *Writing partnerships: Service-Learning in composition.* Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English,

Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. New York: The Free Press.

Flower, L. (1997). Partners in inquiry: A logic for community outreach. In L. Adler-Kassner, R. Crooks, & A. Watters (Eds.), *Writing the community: Concepts and models for service-learning in composition* (pp. 95-117). Washington, DC: American Association of Higher Education.

Flower, L., Long, E., & Higgins, L. (2000). *Learning to rival: A literate practice for intercultural inquiry.* In Rhetoric, Knowledge, and Society Series, C. Bazerman (Ed.), Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Mertz, J., & Schroerlucke, K. (1999). Computer science in the community. Pittsburgh, PA: Carnegie Mellon Center for University Outreach Research Report.

Peck, W.C., Flower, L., & Higgins, L. (1995). Community literacy. *College Composition and Communication, 46* (2), 199-222.

Smyth, L. & Heath, S.B. (1999). *ArtShow: Youth and community development*. Washington, DC: Partners for Livable Communities.

Swan, S. (1999). *Strategies and roadblocks to the inclusion of community expertise in academic research.* Pittsburgh, PA. Carnegie Mellon Center for University Outreach Research Report.

West, C. (1993). *Keeping faith: Philosophy and race in America*. New York: Routledge.

Notes

[1] The event featured the Pittsburgh premier of Art*Show*, a documentary of youth performance and entrepreneurship, directed by Shirley Heath. Heath then joined a community/university panel and the audience in a dialogue moderated by Linda Flower from the Center for University Outreach. The edited transcript is available on www.cmu.edu/outreach.

[2] For instance, talking about his course (Computer Science in the Community) Joe Mertz later described how he had had to restructure the course to make collaborative planning with community partners an explicitly supported activity in the course, that is, a strategically taught practice, that figured in scheduling and evaluation. (A paper on this course can be found on www.cmu.edu/outreach/csinc)

[3] Readers interested in a research report on more than a decade of anthropological fieldwork in community youth organizations can contact www.PublicEducation.org for a copy of Community Counts by Milbrey W. McLaughlin or Partners@livable.com for the resource guide and docu-

mentary video **ArtShow.** For a full bibliography of the research, contact sbheath@leland.stanford.edu.

[4] Readers interested in the developing findings of the Carnegie Mellon Community Think can visit it on the Intercultural Inquiry web site (http://english.cmu.edu/inquiry) or contact Linda Flower (lf54@andrew.cmu.edu). The site also invites readers using intercultural inquiry in their own work to post research briefs on work in progress. And it offers a place for students conducting such inquiry in service learning classes or outreach projects to post abstracts and URLs of work published on their local web sites. For a student introduction to writing in community-based service learning and guidance in how to structure an intercultural inquiry, see *Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing in College and Community*, L. Flower (Harcourt College Publishers, 1998).

Research on the learning of college students and teachers and urban teenagers engaged in the process of collaborative intercultural inquiry can be found in *Learning to Rival: A Literate Practice for Intercultural Inquiry*, L. Flower, (1996).

E. Long, and L. Higgins (Erlbaum, 2000), and in "Negotiating the Meaning of Difference," L. Flower, *Written Communication*, 1996, vol. 13 (1), 44-92.

Linda Flower is Co-Director for the Center for University Outreach and Professor of English and Rhetoric at Carnegie Mellon University. Author of numerous books and articles, two of her recent works include: *The Construction of Negotiated Meaning: A Social Cognitive Theory of Writing* (Southern Illinois, 1994) and *Learning to Rival: A Literate Practice for Intercultural Inquiry.* (co authored with E. Long and L. Higgins, Erlbaum, 2000).

Shirley Brice Heath is Professor of Linguistics and English at Stanford University. Known for her ethnographic research on the language and literacy of adolescents and adults, her recent books include *ArtShow: Youth and Community Development* (co-authored with Laura Smyth, Washington, DC: Partners for Livable Communities 1999).