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## John Dewey and the Rebuilding of Urban Community: Engaging Undergraduates as Neighborhood Organizers

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*John Dewey's related concerns to revitalize education and to rebuild community and democracy at the local level have powerfully appealed to service-learning advocates. Yet only rarely have students been engaged directly as neighborhood organizers, a role that, from Dewey's perspective, would appear to have great educational and social promise. After exploring this anomaly, this paper employs Dewey's understanding of democracy to analyze one program which has succeeded in making widespread use of college students as front-line organizers. The complementarity between what students do in their neighborhood target sites and what happens within the classroom generates the extraordinary potential of this service-learning activity.*

Concern about the deterioration of local community is central to John Dewey's philosophy of education, democracy, and social reform. That deterioration, already serious at the end of the 19th century, obviously has continued apace in our own time. Powered by diverse and widely ramifying forces, including the on-going growth of individualism (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985), modern communications technology and generational effects (Putnam, 2000), and the structural economic shift away from manufacturing to an information-based economy (Fukuyama, 1999), challenges to community life at many levels, and concomitant strains in our democratic institutions, have become increasingly evident. From this perspective, John Dewey's relevance has never been greater.

Dewey's vision for education also underlies the contemporary service-learning movement. Although Dewey focused on primary and secondary schools, his ideals have been adapted and extended to colleges and universities. The convictions that education must center on society's most pressing problems, particularly the reconstruction of democratic community, that it engage students in community service and prepare them for lifelong commitment to civic involvement and social reconstruction, and that it embody the same principles of democratic participation, reflection, and experimentalism that are to be encouraged in the wider community, informs the ideals and practice of service-learning (Barber, 1984; Benson & Harkavy, 1991, 1997, 1999; Hatcher, 1997; Keith, 1998; Rhoads, 1997; Saltmarsh, 1996).

The distinctively local orientation of Dewey's thought, in regard to community, democracy, and education, also coincides with the perspectives of contemporary advocates of service-learning. Raised

in a small Vermont town, Dewey believed that community life consisted in the personal networks that connect the residents of local streets and neighborhoods: "In its deepest and richest sense," he wrote, "a community must always remain a matter of face-to-face intercourse" (quoted in Saltmarsh, 1996, p. 16). And again, "There is no substitute for the vitality and depth of close and direct intercourse and attachment.... Democracy begins at home, and its home is the neighborly community" (quoted in Harkavy & Benson, 1998, p. 17). Consistent with these theoretical perspectives, Dewey took keen interest in the work of Jane Addams' Hull House (Saltmarsh, p. 17, 19), one of whose central goals was to convene local residents, promote education and a sense of common interests, and help people deal with their problems. In ways that would immediately appeal to service-learning advocates, Hull House and its surrounding neighborhoods also provided crucial places of learning for the faculty and students of the University of Chicago. It was here, at least in part through reform initiatives undertaken by Addams and her followers, that they learned of the city's agonizing problems and of what might be done to mitigate them.

Given their recognition of the deepening crisis in local community, their awareness of the need for "borderland experiences" (e.g. Hayes & Cuban, 1997, Keith, 1997), and their widening endorsement of Dewey's hopes for education, especially its application to urban problems immediate to our campuses, it is striking that service-learning advocates have so seldom engaged in direct efforts to rebuild local community, particularly through neighborhood organizing. The potential benefits to be derived from such involvement would appear obvious. Civic education would be furthered directly through local neighborhood associations, which today represent

one of the few sources of organized citizen involvement in central-city politics and which might be presumed to need help (never enjoying sufficient staff to extend organizing to many corners of their jurisdictions). Neighborhood-level work would engage students across boundaries of culture, class, and race in activities that respond directly to pressing local issues. As organizers, students would interact as equals with capable, organized adults, thus avoiding the pitfalls of "charity" (to use Dewey's language) or of the "social worker perspective" (Kreitzmann & McKnight, 1993).

Likewise, opportunities would appear unlimited for applying Dewey's principles of pedagogy (and democracy and community building) to the activities of students engaged in organizing, an arena replete with stimulating "forked-road" decisions, opportunities for experiment, and stimuli for reflection.

Given such promise, it is remarkable that students in fact have so seldom been engaged as neighborhood organizers. They serve in soup kitchens, pound nails with future owners of Habitat for Humanity homes, tutor and mentor children in hundreds of schools, yet are rarely to be found doing direct organizing in neighborhoods.

Three broad factors help account for this. First, there is the extreme social distance between faculty and students and the residents of low-income neighborhoods—a reality that often generates apprehensions about possible threats associated with street-level organizing. Second, skills of neighborhood organizing are not commonly found among either faculty or students (compare, for example, the relative ease with which service-learning participants have taken on tutoring and mentoring responsibilities). Third, contrary to what educators might presume, neighborhood organizations themselves frequently remain hesitant to take on students as organizers. Such organizations typically harbor serious (and unfortunately very realistic) doubts about students' understandings of urban neighborhoods, capacity to relate with neighborhood residents across racial, class, and ethnic divides, social maturity (especially readiness to cope with conflict), and short (term- or semester-length) time perspective. Having very limited staffs, neighborhood organizations also have insufficient time to train and mentor student interns. Finally, given their tendency (especially when short of personnel) to get absorbed either in administrative matters or in the mode of responding only to occasional crises, many neighborhood organizations actually do surprisingly little on-going grassroots organizing, and are thus remain practically ill-prepared to take on students in this capacity. These diverse factors, affecting both potential partners, help explain why service-learning has

made so little headway in the arena of neighborhood organizing.

The case study that follows demonstrates that these obstacles can indeed be overcome and explains, at least in one context, how that was done. The larger function of the discussion, however, will be to show how Dewey's thought provides a framework for understanding, appreciating, and critically thinking about a service-learning project devoted to neighborhood organizing. Dewey helps us comprehend crucial dimensions about what it is to organize a community and how to structure the experience in such a way that the extraordinary educational benefits, for students as well as residents, can be realized.

### The Complementarity of Organizing and Educational Goals

Fundamental to the whole discussion is Dewey's conviction that the enterprises of *Community-building, democracy-building, and learning are essentially one and the same thing*, that the principles and concepts apply to all, and that they are mutually dependent upon each other. This interpretation, forcefully presented in an earlier issue of this journal by John Saltmarsh (1996), itself needs some explanation. "Democracy," Dewey wrote, "is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself" (quoted in Saltmarsh, p. 16). What accounts for this equation is the breadth and local orientation of Dewey's general conception of democracy:

From the standpoint of the individual [democracy] consists in having a responsible share according to capacity in forming and directing the activities of groups to which one belongs and in participating according to need in the values which the groups sustain. From the standpoint of the groups, it demands liberation of the potentialities of members of a group in harmony with the interests and goods which are common. (quoted in Giles & Eyster, 1994, p. 82)

Democracy thus constitutes an ideal of responsible participation, or of citizenship—one that applies with equal validity to the working of any true community.

Democracy and the process of reflective learning also overlap in Dewey's thought. "Inquiry," he argued, "was the method of democracy. It was also the method of science" (Charles Anderson, 1991, quoted in Harkavy, 1999). What Dewey means is that effective learning, like democracy, is oriented toward collective problem solving and depends upon reflection, discourse, and experiment. As explained in *Democracy and Education* (Dewey, 1916), this process moves through typical stages: initial "per-

plexity," or "in [and] doubt," a "tentative interpretation" of the situation; a gathering of additional facts and ideas to "define and clarify the problem"; a further elaboration of the "tentative hypothesis"; and finally, "doing something to bring about the anticipated result, and thereby testing the hypothesis" (quoted in Saltmarsh, 1996, p. 18). Always the pragmatist, Dewey believed that education, like democracy, must serve the goal of social transformation. Indeed in his eyes the fates of democracy and progressive education were wholly interdependent. If democracy was to be realized, "...it must affect all the modes of human association; the family, the school, industry [and] religion" (quoted in Saltmarsh, p. 19). Overall, then, although democracy is clearly central to Dewey's thought, the same can be said for his ideals of community and reflective inquiry. (Also see Benson & Harkavy, 1991, 1997; Harkavy, 1999.)

The conjuncture of the principles of democracy, community, and inquiry suggests that, for Dewey, the same criteria used to analyze students' community-based organizing activities should also be used to analyze what happens within their service-learning classroom. Again relying heavily on Saltmarsh (1996), I will employ these five criteria: (1) association/communication as a starting point for community, (2) the empowerment of those usually left without voice or influence, (3) reflection/experimentation in response to immediate problems, (4) the overcoming of social divisions, and (5) the transcendence of the dualism between self and society. In addition to serving as analytic categories, these criteria represent extraordinarily ambitious goals, for organizers and educators alike, and shed important light on where their efforts for improvement might be focused.

The complementarity of what students strive to accomplish in the field as neighborhood organizers and of what can develop in the classroom is not merely an analytic convenience. What emerges, rather, is new appreciation of the coherence and synergies that can develop when service-learning advocates succeed in involving students as organizers.

### The Building of Democratic Community in the Neighborhood

Building Blocks of Kalamazoo, Michigan, sprang directly from a "crisis of local community." An interested Kalamazoo College professor with personal organizing experience (the author) met with directors of Kalamazoo's neighborhood associations and representatives of Kalamazoo Neighborhood Housing Services and the Local Initiatives Support Corporation to discuss a broad, but not commonly acknowledged problem: despite impressive

strengths and accomplishments, the city's neighborhood associations simply weren't staying abreast of the "garden variety" problems typical of hard-pressed urban areas—lax landlords, loud parties, unruly children, and unabashed drug dealing. Just to name a few—and local residents, as a consequence, were frequently discouraged, fearful, and unready to invest either energy or money in neighborhood improvement. Significantly, because these unhappy realities threatened their substantial monetary investments (and probably because they were not immediately responsible for such conditions), the city-wide housing organizations responded most positively to this presentation.

On-going conversations further clarified one key component of this problem: the neighborhood associations' inability to mobilize residents at the level of the street. Lacking resources to extend effective organizing to individual streets, neighborhood associations simply could not mobilize people either to address problems themselves or to cooperate effectively with their neighborhood association or city government. If street-level organizing were to prove possible, it was also decided, associations would need access both to additional staff/organizing time and an immediate economic incentive for people to participate. On the strength of this redefined problem and hypothesis, a group that included the author, the housing organization representatives, and the two interested neighborhood association directors (just two of seven) proceeded with more specific planning.

Space does not permit discussion of the first-year pilot project, involving three students and two sites, that emerged from these initial discussions, nor the gradual evolution of the administrative set-up. As Dewey would be quick to point out, this process involved a series of "experiments," evaluations, and restructurings. Beginning in the third year, however, the basic working arrangement that we still employ had emerged.

As for staff, Building Blocks provides each target site with a combination of a paid part-time association-appointed supervisor<sup>2</sup> and three seminar-based student organizers. This personnel gives the association the capacity to extend its reach to at least some individual streets, while imposing minimum burdens on existing paid staff, thus addressing one important obstacle. In addition, each target site gets \$5000. Funded by a combination of the City's Community Development Block Grant dollars and donations from community foundations and other private sources, these grants enable each street-level team to buy materials for the small-scale fix-up and beautification activities around which mobilization occurs (more on this below) and, most importantly, provide

an immediate economic incentive for participants.

This basic structure incorporates a vision of face-to-face democratic community that Dewey would immediately recognize. Through the vehicle of participatory (self-help and mutual help) small-scale physical projects, Building Blocks' goal is to regenerate informal social networks, which in turn will build participatory block-level groupings committed to the long-term revitalization of the street.

Let us now examine the typical practical experience of the Building Blocks program as it has evolved. Although project sites vary considerably, the overall process tends to be fairly standardized. In fact, the provision of considerable structure appears crucial for short-term student-led initiatives; knowing the general parameters of the project, residents as well as students can proceed with considerable confidence and speed. The areas targeted by Building Blocks are very small, some 25-75 homes in all. With the support of the site supervisor, whose help in easing initial apprehensions is key, each student team painstakingly canvasses its assigned street, going door to door to explain the general project guidelines, engage participants, and identify potential leaders. Absentee owners as well as actual residents are recruited to join in a planning process that ultimately will involve identifying priorities, making budget decisions, and carrying out the work itself.

What students find in their visits reflects the frightening isolation that pervades our increasingly impoverished, increasingly disorderly neighborhoods: few people know more than one or two of their neighbors. From Dewey's perspective, such extreme isolation has dire implications for local community (and democracy): without substantial contact and communication between people, there is no basis for the shared goals or concerns that might support higher-level collective activity: "There is more than a verbal tie," Dewey points out, "between the words common, community, and communication. Men [sic] live in a community in virtue of the things they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common" (quoted in Saltmarsh, 1996, p. 16).

The organizers' goal in each target site is to engage some 10-20 households in the project, enough to form a street-level network with potential to outlast the immediate fix-up activities. To do so, especially in the absence of prior association, requires a powerful incentive: in the case of Building Blocks, the lure of individual grants. With some \$5000 available in material assistance, people can see the possibilities of making some significant improvements in their individual homes and are

more likely to sustain their involvement. This is not the only motivation; some public-mindedness also exists on most streets, and the students, infected by the vision of communal involvement, are relentless in their canvassing. Together, these factors usually suffice to get 5-10 residents to a first meeting.

The context of these initial gatherings is curious. Most people come primarily out of self-interest and then find themselves amidst neighbors who, in most cases, they scarcely recognize, but who also want a "piece of the action." Slowly changes begin to occur. After introductions and additional information about Building Blocks' general guidelines (i.e., emphasis on self-help, cooperation, maximum participation, and physical fix-up and beautification projects), residents are encouraged to start talking about *their street*—about the collective entity. What do they like about it? What do they find problematic? What would they like to change? They make plans to re-gather, often with the plan of walking the street together to sharpen awareness of their area as a whole.

We now shift our attention to John Dewey's five dimensions of democracy (and community-) building: association-communication, empowerment, reflection-experimentation, the overcoming of social divisions, and the transcendence of the dualism between self and society. These categories serve as a convenient framework not only for describing but also for thinking critically about, the Building Blocks program.

Association/Communication

Though he might regret the need for financial incentives, Dewey would appreciate Building Blocks' priorities. Fundamental to his conception of building community (and democracy), as we have seen, was "face to face" association. "Associated life," he asserted, "is not a matter of physical juxtaposition, but of genuine intercourse—of community of experience in a non-metaphorical sense of community" (quoted in Saltmarsh, 1996, p. 16).

Association and communication among residents begins at the first convening of the street's residents and continues throughout the duration of the project in the many meetings required to plan and carry out the work activities, on workdays themselves, and at the impromptu social gatherings and end-of-the-term celebrations. As people come together in equals, to plan, paint and eat together, they find opportunity to talk about their street or explore one another's experiences. Not surprisingly, the level of association among active residents varies very considerably between target sites, but in almost every case intense and sustained connections develop.

Empowerment

Believing that the workings of a true community and of local democracy were one in the same, Dewey would be concerned with the degree of empowerment (i.e., the assumption of real responsibilities for planning, prioritizing, and carrying out the project) attained by residents in our organizing sites (Banson & Harkavy, 1991, p. 8). Let it be said straightaway that this area remains particularly problematic for Building Blocks, which, like so many organizations, experiences tension between the goals of democracy and concerns for predictability and accountability. This is not to say that empowerment is not taken seriously. We operate on a radically decentralized basis; although general guidelines are pre-determined, each site operates independently in deciding upon the specifics. There is firm commitment to having the residents themselves come up with ideas for projects and decide which projects are to be funded and how much to allocate to each.

Likewise, residents themselves (though assisted by neighbors and outside community volunteers) are ultimately responsible for finishing up the work on their own properties. These are substantial responsibilities (and rights), ones consistent with hopes for promoting democracy.

Nevertheless, idealism must also be tempered by many practical considerations, and this is the source of tension. Residents themselves often resist taking on these responsibilities; hardly knowing one another at the outset and possibly unaccustomed to leadership roles in their work lives, they don't find it easy to accept the burdens of decision-making, especially when competing self-interests are involved. Nor do supervisors or students, who share heavy responsibility for the project's success, find it easy to give over responsibility to residents. They fear that decisions will not get made, will not get made within the short time frame (10 weeks) available for the project, or will not get made consistent with general project guidelines (e.g., funding is limited to small-scale exterior fix-up activities). Building Blocks compensates for the inexperience of all participants and for the limited time perspective of students by providing substantial structure. This structure facilitates everyone's role, but it also delimits the democratic process.

Accountability to funders poses additional strictures. For a household to qualify for federal Community Development Block Grant dollars (which support about half of our grants to residents), considerable information must be gathered, certain limitations regarding projects must be observed, and all receipts for purchases must be carefully collected and organized. Perhaps most daunting are the technical challenges associated with the work projects themselves: the budgeting of particular projects, the deployment of volunteer workers, the sequencing of problems, and the solving of specific construction problems such as how to get a security fence built straight and level.

The accumulation of these administrative and technical concerns helps explain why it is often difficult to hand over responsibilities to residents. During the 1999 and 2000 project years, this reluctance generated considerable tension between supervisors and (perhaps naively idealistic) student organizers. In general, the tension between democratic empowerment and pressure to ensure orderly administrative routines seems likely to persist.

A second dimension of resident empowerment also needs recognition. The growing coherence and confidence developed by resident participants over the course of the 10-week project generate new potentials for carrying their interests before the association that represents their neighborhood as a whole. Recognizing the two-way benefits associated with this process, Building Blocks now actively promotes such linkages. Partly as a consequence, eight residents from one target site had become active in their neighborhood association activities within three months of their project's conclusion. To the extent that residents "connect" with their neighborhood association, they become more capable of getting their needs addressed, whether by the association itself or by city government.

Reflection/Experimentation

Building Blocks' determination to assign significant decision-making responsibilities to target-site residents generates multiple opportunities for their reflection and experimentation. As a condition for realizing individual and collective benefits, residents must apply themselves, albeit with their supervisor's and students' support, to the inevitably difficult tasks of determining the technical and financial practicality of different possible projects, allocating funds, and then carrying out the work themselves. Dewey would be pleased that residents could be induced to assume these responsibilities. However, he also would focus on the process of subsequent thought, action, and reflection. The general features of a genuinely reflective experience, in his view, were these: (1) perplexity regarding the factors that might provide practical leverage on the problem at hand, (2) a tentative interpretation regarding the operation of those factors, (3) a careful survey of facts that might clarify the particular challenge, (4) the progressive elaboration of an hypothesis relevant to the resolution of the problem, and (5) actually doing something to bring about the anticipated result, thereby

testing the hypothesis (Saltmarsh, 1996, p. 18). Therefore, reflection both precedes and allows action, and the process as a whole takes on one sense of *experimentation*.

A brief example may help demonstrate how at least some elements of Dewey's vision are realized here. At the first meetings, participants often join with students and the supervisor in considering why others did not attend. In one of last year's sites, the residents hypothesized that absentees found it hard to extend credibility to young and inexperienced students. They also thought it possible that people might pay more attention to fellow residents.

Encouraged to experiment, residents tried talking to their own neighbors, directly resulting in four new participating households at the next meeting. In ways such as this, the most active and thoughtful residents learn something about both their neighbors and the organizing process. Over the course of the project, residents are typically induced to participate in at least some of these modest reflective and experiential exercises, and their understanding of the street is likely to improve substantially over the project's duration.

Life is short, however, and the pressure to act is often intense. To carry a project from beginning to end in 10 weeks is very difficult. In practice, therefore, the reflection and experimentation process idealized by Dewey remains very incompletely realized.

*Overcoming Social Divisions*

Also critical to Dewey's conception of community was success in *overcoming social divisions*, a process that characteristically depends upon the intense interaction demanded by the on-going work of the project. As Harry Boyle and Nancy Kari (1996), Daniel Kemnis (1990), and others have helped us understand, work that is demanding, that depends upon the diverse inputs and skills of many, and that brings tangible benefits to the wider community carries extraordinary potential for bridging social divides. These understandings represent a direct extension of Dewey's own maxim: "Only action truly unifies."

Building Blocks activities do indeed help neighbors see beyond differences of race/ethnicity, culture, and class. Among these dimensions of difference, progress in regard to *race and ethnicity* has been the most dramatic; almost every target street has some racial or ethnic diversity, and almost every one yields impressive accounts of new bridging relationships. *Cultural differences*, especially in the form of generational divisions, also have been bridged in many cases; overcoming initial doubts and fears, retired people learn through the process of shared

work not to fear or to look down upon newcomers. *Class differences*, by contrast, remain discouragingly hard to overcome. Despite our students' eager efforts, renters seldom participate in our projects. Understandably, those who rent believe that it is the owner's responsibility to maintain physical conditions, and believe that it is the owner, rather than the tenants, who would receive most lasting benefit from the project. Although one or two renters may get involved, their general absence probably reinforces the division between those who rent and those who own.

Overall, however, common involvement in the project does serve to mitigate many divisions, personal as well as demographic, and the delight experienced by residents as they discover their shared experiences and concerns is often explicit. "Before the project I thought everyone on my block was a drug dealer or a criminal," stated one local activist. "Now I realize that they are people just like me." Another resident emotionally recounted how the collective project helped her overcome a long-time, largely baseless feud with a neighbor: "I felt so ashamed when I got home from the [planning] meeting. I found we had so many common interests." After the work activities themselves, this woman's confidence had expanded: "Now I dare send my children to play up the street. I know people will look out for them." Student organizers take great joy in describing the street parties that break out in the aftermath of workdays and the small acts of mutual support—people lending items, sharing phones, listening to one another's experiences and giving advice—many of them transcending boundaries of race, ethnicity, and age that grow out of the project.

Not all the experiences associated with projects as demanding and as closely associated with self-interest as these are positive, of course; people can get worn out and they can disagree, sometimes even violently. But in most of our sites, Building Blocks generates significant networks of support among residents.

*Transcending the Dualism of Self and Society*

We now turn to the fifth and most abstract of the contributions to the construction of community, the *broadening of the individual's sense of self*. "For Dewey," Saltmarsh explains, "the individual's sense of self is only fully developed in association, such that he denied the dualism dividing self and society.... The self is by no means denied, but individualism is redefined. 'To gain an integrated individuality,' wrote Dewey, 'each of us needs to cultivate his own garden. But there is no fence about this garden; it is no sharply marked off enclosure'" (1996, p. 16). The broadening of the individual's sense of self—

what Lapsley and DuBois (1994) refer to as "relational self" —begins as early as the first meetings. Here, homeowners are encouraged to realize that the appeal (and material worth) of individual properties is very much a function of the *whole street*; that their individual homes, however well kept up, are diminished to the degree that neighbors neglect to mow, repaint, or pick up trash. Project participants initially may focus only on obtaining the maximum grant for themselves, but most come to realize how important it is to spread the benefits, involve other households, and see the whole street improve.

There is another, more subtle way by which the dualism between self and society is transcended. People often come to realize that *self-realization*, in a more general sense, depends upon their neighborhood, and more specifically, upon their own public involvement in the neighborhood. To illustrate this process convincingly would stretch space limitations, but it remains a powerful source of energy underlying the project. From the first days of their recruiting, student organizers seek out individual "assets" (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993) even in the most unlikely prospects, and they sustain impressive commitment to seeing these potential contributions realized in practice. Not infrequently, individual residents come to appreciate that their emergence as persons with capacities of significance is attributable to Building Blocks and to the development of their street as a working collective.

In summary, then, Building Blocks would be seen by Dewey as addressing five key aspects of building a democratic, self-educating community: bringing residents back into intense association around shared problems, empowering residents through participative decision-making and direct work responsibilities, inducing residents to engage in reflection and practical experimentation, overcoming social barriers between residents, and transcending the dualism between self and society. Owing to the incomplete preparation of leadership and uneven readiness on the part of residents to respond, target sites vary considerably in the degree to which these considerations are realized, and even in the most successful sites, their application is constrained by an assortment of factors, real or imagined. Nevertheless, Building Blocks' progress toward realizing these goals would seem to justify close attention both from neighborhoods seeking help in their organizing work and from educators interested in opening up new ways by which their students can contribute to the revitalization of community and civic involvement in nearby neighborhoods.

*The Education of Students: Building Democratic Community in the "Classroom"*

We now turn to inspect the relevance of these same five ideas to the students' *educational experience* as Building Blocks organizers, including their activities both in the neighborhood and in the classroom (in which I serve as the instructor). As we have seen, Dewey was convinced of the "oneness" of the process of realizing community, democracy, and learning, whether among residents in a street-level work-site or among students. The workings of community, democracy, and learning were thought to be thoroughly interdependent and indistinguishable. Thus it is that the same categories that guided an assessment of Building Blocks' neighborhood-based activities are also key, both for understanding and for gaining critical leverage, to the students' more general educational experience. We will now examine these parallels, and then conclude with some extensive excerpts from the students' final papers.

*Association/Communication*

In the classroom, as in the field, participants are brought together into close and sustained association around practical challenges. For those enrolling in the Neighborhood Organizing Practicum, intense connections begin in the term prior to the formal inception of the class, through a series of activities—informational sessions, selection, and training—designed to generate a common appreciation of the challenges lying before them and to promote common commitment to Building Blocks' goals and practices. The intensity of student involvement, as they form teams, select neighborhood sites (each year we begin with a fresh slate of targeted streets), and first meet with their resident supervisors, is palpable.

Interaction between students intensifies with the convening of the Practicum on the very first evening of the spring term. Teams are reintroduced to their respective supervisors and neighborhood directors, and plans are laid for the first week's canvassing. Alumni from prior years' Building Blocks projects illustrate the process of "door-knocking" (door-to-door recruiting), then new students take up the same roles. The professor reviews the broad outlines of Building Blocks philosophy and practice, briefly anticipates the week's reading and reflection assignment, and sends the students on their way.

The serious dramas that play out over the course of the term powerfully draw together each team of three. The unique circumstances of each site—different residents, supervisors, turns of fate—and the multiplicity of sites (eight this past spring) mean that each team must evaluate and respond to their situa-

tion independently. Help from various sources is available, but each group must take initiative. Under these conditions, teams coalesce very quickly (even when, as is typical, they consist of a mix of first-year and upper-level students).

The Practicum class, which in our project year 2000 consisted of 24 first-time participants and seven alumni facilitators, also is forced as a whole to confront problems that emerge from individual sites. For example, the viability of one site was threatened by the rapid deterioration of the neighborhood association that was sponsoring that project. The residents in that site had already met, however, and they (and the members of the student team) had a lot of energy already invested in the initiative. What to do to keep the site going? Following a generic problem-solving protocol, the class as a whole took up the challenge, generating a host of suggestions. This was but the first problem addressed by the class as a whole. Others included discussions about how to engage residents in recruiting; about why residents so resisted responsibilities that to the students appeared both important and manageable; and, later, about how to get supervisors to turn over more responsibilities to residents. The burdens associated with the Practicum forge close ties between student participants, far closer than in any other class I teach.

*Empowerment*

"Dewey's theory of democratic education," write Hartkavy and Benson, "emphasized that students should be able to help shape their own learning, help form their curriculum, and reflect on its value" (1998, p. 16). The reader by now can appreciate key dimensions of empowerment realized by students. In the field, beginning with their door-to-door canvassing and extending through the collective workdays, students exercise extraordinary responsibilities. Unlike conventional interns, in almost all cases they feel like senior members of a larger team that includes the neighborhood association-appointed supervisor and the most active neighborhood residents.

In the classroom, as described above, students also have responsibility for dealing with emergent problems, both those particular to individual sites and those which are common to several. At the term's end, students also include in their final papers several pages of evaluative commentary, partly centered on the Building Blocks project, partly on the Practicum itself (readings, assignments, modes of discussion, etc.). Finally, there is a measure of empowerment realized by those students who elect to continue with the project, serving in subsequent years as interviewers, trainers, class facilitators and coordinators. Individually and collectively, these persons work with the faculty member in making

numerous important decisions.

Limits to student empowerment inevitably exist. The course as a whole is driven by the imperatives of organizing residents and completing work activities, within 10 weeks. But the very nature of the Practicum, as a field-based organizing experience, ensures that the extent of empowerment remains substantial.

*Reflection/Experimentalism*

Opportunities for "praxis" abound in a neighborhood organizing practicum. In addition to the in-the-field and in-class reflection and problem-solving processes already described, students are required each week to reflect extensively on some aspect of their work, especially as related to the reading or to some emergent problem. As their third-week assignment, for example, I give students both the U.S. Census reports (1970, 1980, and 1990) for their overall neighborhood and a succession of City Directory listings (1970, 1980, and 1990) for their particular street. Their assignment, using these published sources together with brand new information based on their own house-by-house canvassing, is to reflect upon the changing demographics of their site. This draws their attention to what is, in most cases, the growing ratio of renters to owners, of one-parent households to two-parent households, of poverty-level to non-poverty-level families; to consider the relevance of these shifts to the highly variable responsiveness of people to their canvassing; and to wonder about the larger forces that lead to these same tendencies in almost all their sites. As valuable as these understandings are, students also are asked to consider what they might do to better attract renters to the program.

With each succeeding year, I have encouraged students to do more systematic reflection: this past year, for example, I began asking for weekly installments of a "critical incident journal," in which students responded to at least one event that had surprised them and/or forced a reevaluation of their roles or strategies. As I review Dewey's ideas, however, I am convinced of the need to orient still more of the practicum toward the identification and clarification of problems, and toward the more systematic evaluation of efforts to resolve them. Students need more encouragement to reflect freely upon the meaning of their experiences, and readings should more consistently be timed to follow the recognition of challenges rather than to anticipate them. Constraints of time and student energy, of course, remain very real, but even within these limits, more can be done to realize the learning potential Dewey foresaw.

*Overcoming Social Divisions*

Students, organizers are asked to overcome a number of social divisions: between themselves and the neighborhood residents and supervisors, between one another, and between themselves and their professor.

As indicated at the outset, neighborhood association staff initially harbor many doubts about students' ability to find common ground with the immensely diverse populations that form their constituency. Dewey shared this concern. Greatly influenced by the thinking of Jane Addams, he insisted that service relationships avoid any semblance of "charity," a mode that "assumes a superior and inferior class" (quoted in Saltmarsh, 1996, p. 17; see also Morton & Saltmarsh, 1998). What Dewey saw in Addams' Hull House was a much more egalitarian connection. "The best kind of help to others," he asserted, "is indirect, and consists in such modifications of the conditions of life...as enables them independently to help themselves" (quoted in Saltmarsh, 1996 p. 17; see also Rhoades, 1997), a statement that indicates how eagerly Dewey would embrace student organizers.

Building Blocks employs an approach to organizing that explicitly emphasizes the power of personal relationships and encourages students to go beyond a merely instrumental connection with people on their street. Assisting in this process, as discussed earlier, is also our emphasis on identifying resident "assets." As they realize their utter dependence on the varied skills and resources brought by residents, students almost necessarily come to respect their resident collaborators, and relationships that initially may have been subtly hierarchical are increasingly experienced as egalitarian.

By the end of the 10-week term, students feel remarkably "at home" on their assigned streets. As reflected in their final papers, moreover, their relationships with residents, which signify success in crossing over the boundaries of race, ethnicity, and/or class, have tremendous personal significance. The following excerpts, drawn from two of this past year's sites, are typical of the class as a whole:

Working with a group of residents like those who reside on Lake and Linon [Streets] nearby assures that you will make lasting relationships. Rob, Tony, and I [the three students on this team] quickly felt that we belonged. We were not outsiders in the residents' eyes, and we were treated accordingly. We grew especially close to Richard and Paul.... The bond that we formed...eventually extended to most of the neighbors. At the celebration feast...I felt as if I were attending an intimate family dinner instead of a block party. Fascinated with

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our lives at school, the residents seem interested and almost proud of our accomplishments...I was so pleased with relations we had formed with the residents, along with the relationships that they formed between themselves.... It is through these residents that I was given a lesson in acceptance. I watched as they accepted Rob, Tony and me, each other, and [Kalamazoo College] volunteers without questions. The tolerance of the individuals we were trying to help was humbling and will forever cause me to evaluate my own actions.

During the process of this project I have come to terms with many of the latent stereotypes and biases I hold. I realize that in general I went in thinking less of these people than I do now that I really know them. I went into the Eastside feeling somewhat heroic, that I was going to help these people where they could not succeed on their own. I am glad I was proved wrong. I have realized that [many] of the stereotypes we as a society hold are based on a small minority of people who fit into a category. These low-income people are not unintelligent or lazy; in fact they are some of the hardest working, ingenious people I have ever met.... This [experience] made me realize how I view others without ever really thinking about how their circumstances may have gotten them to where they are. I think in some sense this experience will never let me look at people in the same light. I have learned to interact first and judge later.

In much the same fashion, the challenges faced in common by the students, both in their teams and in the class as a whole, welded strong bonds amongst the students in the Practicum. The instructor, as well as upper-level students assisting in the course, also play key roles in the team effort. Common devotion to the organizing challenges generates significant unity, fulfilling Dewey's belief that community is required for the effective operation of the classroom no less than for the neighborhood street, and that the two processes reinforce one another.

*Transcending the Dualism of Self and Society*

The subtlety of the process whereby individuals come to recognize the interdependence of self and collectivity again presents an interpretive challenge. However, there is strong evidence that this process is indeed likely to occur, perhaps on two levels. First, as in the challenges incorporated into wilderness training, students realize that, absent the Practicum and the support of others, they couldn't imagine assuming the challenges of grassroots organizing. Their dependence upon their classmates, residents, professor, and program as a whole, is immense, and

they know it.

Students also come to realize that they (and target-area residents as well) derive a crucial sense of personal meaning from their participation in the program—that the perceived contradiction between civic involvement and a satisfying private life turns out to be, in the words of authors Francis M. Lappe and Paul M. Dubois (1994), “a myth.” Excerpts from final papers (again, typical of many) may help to illustrate this point as well. Here as elsewhere, one may observe how the student’s experience *runs parallel to and is informed by* the experience of their residents, a particularly valuable feature of this variety of service-learning.

Although I would not have predicted it after first opening the book, Lappe and Dubois’ *The Quickening of America* changed many of my ideas.... As the project progressed, I began to see living examples of what the authors were talking about.

The topic of public life was the first to strike me. I agree with the authors’ assertion that Americans are bombarded with the message that ‘our private life, revolving around family and friends, is what really matters. It’s the source of our fulfillment....’

Lappe and Dubois made me ponder, but did not convince me, of the value of a consistent public life. Instead, it was one of our residents, Jerry. I saw Jerry illustrate what Lappe and Dubois call a ‘universal human need,’ knowing that we are contributing to something beyond ourselves. In doing so, ‘public life develops essential aspects of our character and teaches us important skills,’ enhancing our private lives. Jerry stepped out of his intensely private life and found some of the work he was looking for....

As suggested by the preceding, a third dimension of the shift in students’ outlook involves recognizing the broad obligations of citizens in a democratic society, including their own responsibility for social reform. Here again, the changes registered by a student are complemented and reinforced by parallel changes in the residents with whom they worked:

...It took time to convince some of the residents that community service and public life do not have to ‘compete’ with a satisfying private life. As I convinced my residents, I convinced myself, and I began to see that even a small group of citizens might make a difference.

As soon as we finally got residents to attend [meetings], they seemed excited to go beyond the immediate tasks. They were thrilled when they heard that there were continuation grants available [smaller, follow-up grants by which Building Blocks encourages street-level

groups to stay together after students depart] and began to speak about problems that plague the neighborhood. Condemning a rickety old house and stopping drug traffic in the neighborhood seemed within their reach. Watching the residents work so well at our last meeting was a great experience. I felt as though I was watching democracy in action. I must admit that I once thought that voting alone was the role of a citizen within a democracy. I did not see how else a common citizen could contribute. Now I more clearly understood that with the formation of grass-roots organizations all individuals may feel power within the system. Merely by meeting a few times, Lake Street residents felt they could make a difference on their block. It was by observing these residents as they joined together that I was truly able to believe that each individual has power. Democracy suddenly seemed like something that required a more active role, and the politicians and the citizen suddenly seemed much more intertwined.

Or, as another student wrote:

Before entering into this endeavor, my conceptions of public life reflected the ideas and stereotypes most citizens hold.... Every day, I, along with the rest of society, am flooded with images of horror, violence, and inequality. We have come to accept these images as normal, as acceptable. In general, we have displaced these problems onto others.... We have not seen ourselves as capable of or responsible for working toward a solution and remaining America. The concept of everyday citizens as leaders, problem-solvers, and a major part of our democracy is mind boggling. We see our role in democracy as a voter; if we make our way to the polls, then we have done our civic duty.

Through Building Blocks, I have learned that this is not the case.... Rather, democracy is a way of life that meets the deep human need to know that our voices count, to shape the decisions that most affect our well-being’ (Lappe & Dubois, 1994). Although small [i.e., in a small way], our project has helped individuals discard their old notions of democracy and promoted a new, rewarding way of life in which what they say matters. I saw this happen at the meetings where residents gradually took control of the project. They solicited donations, purchased supplies, arranged the work schedule, and voiced their opinions. Along with the residents, I discarded my false assumptions about democracy. Now I view it as a realistic role every individual can play. I may not be able to change the world, but I know that I have the power to change my immediate environment if I choose. I no longer

have to be a passive observer—I can be an active part of in this democratic society.

Through experiences and reflections such as these, a *moral dimension* (yet another of Dewey’s hopes for education and democracy-building more generally—see Saltmarsh, 1996, pp. 15, 19) is added to the students’ learning experience. Paralleling the emergent sense of obligation experienced by residents toward their street, students recognize with growing clarity what they owe to their society. Noticeably more confident in their own ability to make a difference, they are emboldened to imagine a life committed to the rebuilding of democratic community.

### Conclusion

Dewey’s philosophy thus helps us understand the crucial parallels and complementarities between the activities of neighborhood organizers and the workings of a progressive classroom: both involve the building of democratic, self-educating communities, and each depends upon the other. Exploration of this fundamental insight reveals the tremendous potential to be realized by enlarging service-learning to include this kind of community organizing work.

As they become more aware of these rich possibilities, advocates of service-learning may become more concerned with overcoming the factors that heretofore have deterred them from involving students as neighborhood organizers. Here, the Building Blocks program offers considerable hope. Neighborhood organizing skills may remain scarce in higher education, but if faculty members are willing to learn and/or to find roles for outside organizers in the classroom, access to such skills can develop. Furthermore, if organizational arrangements can be worked out whereby neighborhood associations sponsor the overall program, select appropriate sites, and identify on-site resident supervisors, the dangers often associated with street-level organizing can be minimized. Finally, for all their social limitations and inexperience, it’s also clear that students can be guided into becoming effective organizers; given sufficient structure, manageable (i.e., small) target sites, material incentives to spur resident involvement, and support from both supervisors and the classroom, students can do the job, and their contributions to street-level social capital can be significant.

Overall, it is understandable why students only rarely have served as neighborhood organizers. Once the feasibility and benefits of such work are appreciated, however, advocates of service-learning may prove more eager to overcome the usual impediments. To the extent that this happens, the importance of Dewey’s thought to the service-learning

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movement will once again have been demonstrated.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The hesitation of most directors to participate in the first year’s project reflects the several sources of skepticism identified earlier in the paper. Given these obstacles, proponents of service-learning devoted to challenging new work often may need to start small, innovating “at the margins” and hoping to win over the doubters through the force of example.

<sup>2</sup> Usually, a resident participant in a prior year’s site serves as project supervisor. Paid just \$1,000-\$1,300 for their efforts, supervisors are expected to give the students considerable responsibilities, particularly in their canvassing efforts, but also in deciding upon day-to-day organizing strategies, running meetings and helping to plan communal workdays. Supervisors remain responsible to their respective neighborhood associations for the overall success of the projects.

<sup>3</sup> The following excerpts all are drawn from the final papers written by students in the Spring/2000 practicum. There are no overlaps in authors. Names of residents have been changed to assure anonymity.

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## Between School and Community: Situating Service-Learning in University Art Galleries

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*This paper explores the possibility of implementing a new campus-based model of service-learning in the unique environments of university art galleries. Guided by critical theory and a Deweyan pragmatist philosophy, this model promoted the use of constructivist learning strategies by 63 preservice teachers. Serving as facilitators, these preservice teachers worked with a total of 210 visiting schoolchildren in small groups to: a) address multiple perceptual, aesthetic, and social problems; b) actively negotiate and construct new identities; c) share multiple perspectives on and meanings about art; and d) learn to think critically and creatively about complex issues of teaching, learning, and boundary-crossing. Data from a variety of sources, including pre- and post-course attitude surveys and preservice journals, were analyzed and interpreted to reveal that preservice teachers greatly benefited from their service-learning experiences and changed their views of art, teachers, and learning in art gallery-museums.*

In a postmodern society, various conceptual and programmatic boundaries between schools, universities, and communities can be considered unnecessary, even "unnatural" (Anzaldúa, 1987); they serve only to create a metaphorical place known as the "borderland" (Anzaldúa, 1987; Garber, 1995; Hayes & Cuban, 1997). In service-learning programs, students are expected to cross borders that needlessly separate educational experiences situated in schools from those situated in communities. Service-learning must enter the borderland and explore its unfamiliar terrain, which can exist not only 'out' in the community, but also, on their own campuses. This paper explores the possibility of developing and situating a new type of service-learning in university art galleries, where knowledge is constructed and contextualized at the edge of the campus in a borderland that lies between school and community. A hybrid, as it were, this campus-based model promotes significant collaboration between preservice teachers (members of elementary art methods classes) and students from area schools in the largely unfamiliar territory of a gallery borderland. In so doing, this model identifies a type of service-learning experience that makes a difference to prospective teachers and schoolchildren alike.

### Framework for the Campus-Based Model

Based on Deweyan pragmatist and constructivist views of epistemology, cognition, and learning, this model was designed to combine experiential learning, critical reflection, constructivist practices, and service in the context of the "unique educational environments" of the two galleries located on the California State University at Los Angeles campus

(Zeller, 1987). In this model, then, service-learning and pragmatism are clearly connected and contextualized, as are critical reflection, thought, and action. Moreover, the notion that knowledge is both contextual and constructed is integral in the philosophy and design of the model (Liu, 1995). That is, knowledge of art, self, and others is actively constructed by students and preservice teachers in small groups or learning communities and situated in a particular place beyond the classroom.

This approach, which constituted a major component in two class sections of an elementary art methods course, invokes a kind of "border pedagogy" (Giroux, 1992). Such a pedagogy empowers students to cross borders, to work closely in order to understand themselves in relation to others—that is, to understand "otherness," and to reflect critically on issues of race, ethnicity, class, and cultural heritage. It strives to create a metaphorical borderland in which diverse cultural resources allow for the development of new identities and relationships (Giroux, 1992). Fleshing out the theoretical and pedagogical framework of this model, then, the art methods students (who are themselves ethnically- and culturally-diverse, typically first- or second-generation Americans of working class backgrounds), began by questioning their own perceptions that art museums represent opulent cultural spheres reserved only for upper class patrons. In so doing, they began to collapse real or imagined class barriers and develop new identities and relationships within the gallery borderland.

### Preparing to Enter the Borderland

As a part of their professional preparation program, these diverse preservice teachers are required