Connecting the Dots: Designers and Social Workers Learning in Community

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ABSTRACT

Addressing problems of highly disadvantaged public housing communities requires multi-faceted, multi-disciplinary approaches to both the social and physical environment. Accordingly, over the last decade and a half Australian governments have developed a suite of community regeneration initiatives involving both social and physical design interventions. These also provide an opportunity for valuable learning experiences for university students to learn about the complex problems faced by disadvantaged communities and how design interventions need to work hand in hand with social initiatives to help improve quality of life. This paper outlines a unique 12 year partnership between schools of social work and built environment, a state housing department and public housing communities in inner Sydney. It outlines the background to the approaches used, the range of project types, participatory mechanisms, the educational benefits for both students and public housing tenants, and ethical issues in this collaborative community based learning. Its conclusions are supported by quantitative and qualitative evidence from a variety of sources during the life of the project.

INTRODUCTION

In an environment of change in the funding, structure and management of universities in Australia, institutions are often criticised for a lack of interest in their local communities, particularly communities of disadvantage. While this is primarily an issue of the social responsibility of publicly funded institutions, it is also an educational one, as community engagement provides opportunities for important educational experiences while providing genuine assistance to communities of disadvantage. Some disciplines, such as social work, have a strong tradition of community engagement through community placements, whereas in others, such as environmental design, community engagement has been largely opportunistic and therefore both philosophically and pedagogically less well developed and embedded within the curriculum.

Design educators have long grappled with how to integrate learning about social concepts into the curriculum. Typically this has been achieved via the lecture/seminar format, perhaps including some personal reflection or observational exercises, or through socially-oriented design studio projects. Very often, however, these have involved only tokenistic contact with communities, little serious engagement with the social sciences and have become 'dumbed down' in terms of their social learning content. A major reason for this is that real engagement with communities is complicated and can be problematic, both logistically and ethically, for the community and students alike. The other problem is that engagements are typically short term, with little or no ongoing involvement, and hence limited in their ability to assist sustainable change.

At UNSW a unique project has emerged which tries to connect the dots between social and built environment learning, communities of disadvantage and the human services bureaucracy. The Community Development Project (CDP) is a long-term project working with public housing communities and the public landlord to address both social and physical environment issues of concern in highly disadvantaged areas. It results in mutual benefits for students, public housing tenants, the Department of Housing and the University.

THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

Community development has been fundamental to the UNSW CDP's work so it is appropriate to outline what this is and how it has shaped the partnership between social work and built environment staff and students and the communities with whom they engage.

Schools of Social Work have long had partnerships between students and community members. In the late 1800s the Settlement Movement began this approach with university students living in highly disadvantaged areas and working with communities to improve educational, health and social opportunities largely for women and children – there is still a Settlement in Darlington connected with the Social Work program at Sydney University. Although the Settlement approach had serious shortcomings as it was often a thinly veiled attempt to control poorer communities and instill middle class morality (Crocker 1992), nevertheless social work took it up but with a strong emphasis on equality between the partners and self–determination on the part of communities rather than on charity. This way of working in partnership with communities became known as 'community work' and is founded upon community development principles. Community development emphasises the rights of individuals and communities to determine the manner in which their communities develop with workers in genuine partnership with communities rather than trying to impose solutions. Principles of community development include self-determination, empowerment, sharing knowledge, respect for existing community systems and strengths, participation,

community debate and working towards sustainable arrangements. (Ife and Tesoriero 2006)

Social work programs (including UNSW) also have large field placement components in which social work students are supervised by an experienced social worker for periods of up to five months to gain direct experience and knowledge of social work practice. Community work and engagement are core components of field placements.

COMMUNITY-BASED DESIGN, SERVICE LEARNING AND ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP

The CDP also has antecedents in the community design and service learning movements of the 1960s and 1980s, respectively. Community design was originally, and continues to be, typified by a "commitment to building local capacity and providing technical assistance to low- and moderate-income communities through participatory means" (Rios 2006:1). During the late 1960s and 1970s, community design centres flourished across North America as an alternative means of addressing social and physical issues associated with urban renewal. University-based community design and research centres also multiplied. While these may have been initially linked with their institutions' mandate for 'outreach' or 'service', over time many have become part of mainstream academic endeavour.

In the 1980s, the rubric evolved to 'service learning' and these academically-based activities were seen to connect institutions with their 'communities', giving students significant learning experiences and delivering needed expertise to communities. For architecture and planning programs, this was a natural extension of community design practice as it recognised the unique collaborative learning experience to be gained by students when they engaged with communities to address local needs and generate built environment responses.

Current discussions seek to differentiate service learning from Boyer's concept of the scholarship of engagement (Boyer 1996). Over the past 10-15 years service learning has been linked to 'engaged' research and teaching activities, however, a recent paper by Barker proposes a new taxonomy that highlights the subtle differences between the two ideas:

"Service learning typically only applies to the scholarship of teaching, with a decided emphasis on the education of undergraduate students. In service learning the emphasis tends to be primarily student-centred: that is, on how students learn in the process of providing a service to other non-learners…By contrast, the concept of engagement requires collaborative learning in which the public is an active participant in the production of knowledge. Instead of seeing the public as a passive recipient of expert knowledge, engaged scholarship stresses the way in which the public can itself contribute to academic knowledge." (Barker 2004:7)

In Australia, 'community engagement' has been defined by the Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance (AUCEA) as:

"Developing partnerships to jointly develop, identify and implement projects and programs that use university
scholarship and infrastructure to add value to community programs that contribute to community sustainability, and which add value to university activity. "
(Ensor cited at www.uws.edu.au/about/adminorg/devint ord/aucea)

The similarities with a community development approach are obvious.

The CDP commenced in the social work/community development tradition with design staff and students working initially from a community design philosophy, but collaboratively evolving towards a scholarship of engagement approach.

THE DEVELOPMENT AND AIMS OF THE CDP

The CDP commenced in the Waterloo public housing estate in 1995. It was the initiative of the former Head of the School of Social Work, Professor Tony Vinson who undertook a research project that identified high levels of disadvantage and low social cohesion correlated with social isolation and perceptions of crime in the inner-city suburb of Waterloo (Vinson 1995). Following consultations with the local community, he began negotiations with DoH to establish a unit to make the educational resources of the university available to this disadvantaged community to assist in the process of community renewal and provide social work and other students with professional practice experience in a real life community. The following year, he invited staff and students from the Faculty of the Built Environment (FBE) to join the project creating a unique educational partnership between the two disciplines, the NSW Department of Housing (DoH), public housing communities and other social service providers. For 12 years its staff and students have provided community development, environmental design services and training for tenants on six public housing estates (Waterloo, Redfern, South Coogee, Menai, Chifley and Bonnyrigg). It has also provided essential community development training for Dept of Housing (DoH) staff and tenants across the metropolitan area. The partnership provides a long-term commitment to public and other social housing communities through a combination of community development, environmental design, training and research.

The aims of the CDP are to:
- Establish and maintain long-term service and learning relationships with tenants and agencies in specific public housing estates;
- Establish and maintain a long-term service and learning relationship with the DoH;
- Encourage community participation;
- Identify and respond to community needs and priorities;
- Identify projects, resources and assist in their coordination;
- Encourage collaboration with other communities and organisations; and
- Provide appropriate learning opportunities for students and all partners.

By emphasising the meaningful participation of tenants, the CDP supports the process of sustainable physical and social

change through the development of human and social capital (Chaskin, 2001). The community development model fosters long-term relationship building with the communities that result in mutual respect and trust. It is in this safe environment that tenants are empowered to develop their knowledge and skills to actively participate in bringing about community change that reflects their needs.

THE PROGRAMS OF THE CDP

The programs of the CDP are estate specific and multi-faceted and include a mixture of strategies aimed at addressing social and physical-environmental concerns. They fall broadly in the following four categories:

- Supporting community regeneration (both physical and social) through engaging tenants in a process of identifying issues, developing strategies and participating in design and implementation;
- Providing formal training for social housing communities and housing department officers in community development, leadership and volunteering;
- Encouraging community enterprises and developing the management skills of tenants to support independence and sustainability of these ventures; and
- Undertaking research identifying community needs and to evaluate effectiveness of programs.

Table 1 is a detailed cumulative outline of the activities of the CDP over the 12 years of its existence against key aims and the target estates (or other non-estate specific programs).

PARTICIPATION IN THE CDP

Since its inception the CDPs has involved approximately 655 students from social work and built environment disciplines, 570 public housing tenants, 60 Department of Housing staff and 72 staff from other government and non-government agencies. A breakdown of the participation by Estate is shown in Table 2.

The involvement of social work and built environment students incorporates 'placement' and 'studio-based' learning modes typical to each. Between 3 and 5 social work students are attached to the CDP full-time for one semester (14 weeks) and work on projects relevant to their interests and skills. Built environment students are typically involved in classes of 15-30 for six hours, one day per week as part of a 14-week studio program. They typically work in groups and in collaboration with social work students.

ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN COMPONENTS

CDP projects that have an environmental design component include:

- Community regeneration baseline surveys and workshops at the commencement of CDP involvement in a particular estate
- Urban design strategies for improvements to the estate area
- Housing design strategies – either for new housing or improvements to existing outmoded stock

- Community gardens

While in some instances students' designs have been built, in most cases students' work explores a number of options for estate improvements to stimulate discussion and build community capacity in understanding and negotiating improvements to their estate.

A typical design project commences with a detailed briefing for all students by DoH, CDP and other local service agencies on the physical and social characteristics and issues of the estate. On the intial project on an estate, social work and built environment students will also work together on a baseline survey of the estate. A series of on-site workshops are then held with tenants, DoH and other agency staff to identify issues, develop socialand physical strategies and review preliminary design proposals. At the conclusion of the project an exhibition of students' design work is held on the estate for feedback from residents and other stakeholders. Following the project, academics and social work students continue to work with the DoH and a committee of tenants and other stakeholders to develop a Community Action Plan and monitor its implementation.

EVALUATING THE SUCCESS OF THE CDP

Determining the success of the CDP, given its complex set of activities and the different estate contexts, is not a simple task, particularly when its activities are intertwined with other community regeneration activities of the DoH, initiatives of other agencies and in some cases of the communities themselves. Causal relationships between CDP activities and outcomes are therefore difficult to establish. However a number of research projects at various points in the life of the CDP can give indications of its success using both quantitative and qualitative data.

The first, and simplest, indication of success is that the program has survived 12 years and maintains equal and growing financial support from the DoH and UNSW supporting the salary of a full-time Coordinator. Second has been the progressive requests for the program to include additional housing estates in 1999 (Redfern), 2002 (Sth Coogee), 2003 (Menai), 2004 (Chifley) and Bonnyrigg[1] (2006). Third, is its success in 2003 as one of three finalists in the Australian Awards for University Teaching in the category 'Innovative and Practical Approach to the Provision of Educational Services to the Local and/or Regional Community'.

A survey of 200 residents undertaken in 1999 after 4 years of the CDP and the DoH's Neighbourhood Improvement Program repeated Vinson's (1995) study of neighbourhood cohesion using Buckner's (1988) instrument of 18 statements.. Though aggregated cohesion had increased only marginally by 0.7%, 10 of the 18 Buckner variables had moved in a positive direction including 'attraction to neighbourhood' (+10.8%), 'like to move out of the neighbourhood' (-9.8%, reverse order question), 'belonging to neighbourhood' (+9.1%), 'feelings of friendliness in

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[1] Not formally within the CDP, but using similar staff, students and workshop methods

neighbourhood' (+7.9%), 'planning to remain a resident' (+7.5%) and 'loyalty to neighbourhood' (+6.3%). Two additional safety variables added by Vinson also showed considerable improvement – 'safety and night' (+6.2%) and 'safety walking around during the day' (+4.6%). While these results also reflect a wider set of community renewal strategies initiated by the DoH, the work of the CDP represents an important component of this.

Vinson's most recent indicators of disadvantage study shows Waterloo having improved over the 10 years of data collection from being one of the top 20 most disadvantaged suburbs in NSW to being around 90th (where 1 is the most disadvantaged) (Vinson 2007). Based on comparison with other disadvantaged areas he suggests such improvement may be due to the ongoing sustained social engagement of the CDP and other social agencies rather than the quick hit approach that provides community support programs for only three years

Qualitative evidence of success can also be drawn from a number of sources. Examples are given below from tenant, DoH and student perspectives. Firstly, concerning the CDPs work generally from a tenant's perspective:

"There would be a big hole left now that we have become accustomed to having you people around the place, if you were not here we could be quite lost many times." (Tenant)

From a qualitative research project on the community gardens: (Bartolomei et al, 2003)

"[By being involved in the garden] I understand…why the community is very important to working together in any sort of work…." (Tenant)

"I think it gives you a feeling of belonging more… You have something to own. And you're not just another little person in another little box. … but a garden gives you an opportunity to meet people… to relax… to be creative." (Tenant)

From a DoH perspective:

"The University has empowered public housing tenants through its community development and training." (Executive Director, NSW Department of Housing)

"The link to learning is really quite critical and that's one of the fundamental benefits the partnership with the university brings, in terms of professional development, to our staff. (Former Regional Director, Central Sydney Division)

And finally from a student perspective:

"It's been an extremely worthwhile experience - very challenging because of the issues this community faces." (social work student)

"[The best feature of this course was]…having a design project that was more realistic [and having] to take social issues as the main aspect of design. I liked the challenge in trying to improve the lives of others." (architecture student)

THE RISKS AND REWARDS OF COMMUNITY-BASED PROJECTS

While the rewards of collaborative community-based learning are real, so are the risks, as Bordelon and Phillips (2006:145) point out.

"Service-learning is not without its risk to students, community agencies, and universities. Ethical problems may arise as students may find themselves in learning situations where (sic) they do not have the skills and experience to recognize danger, for example".

This, together with and increasing risk averseness in society, and greater ethical scrutiny of any university work that can be construed as 'research' has led to increasing demands of Universities on field work activities. This is a mixed blessing – on the one hand tightening up procedures, but on the other requiring demanding documentation by field work coordinators. This can discourage academics from including field work in their curriculum.

CONCLUSION

The complex problems facing large public housing estates have both social and physical dimensions and therefore require approaches that connect the dots between knowledge and skills from both the social sciences and built environment disciplines. The CDP demonstrates that universities can play a useful role in the processes of community regeneration that is highly valued by housing authorities and local communities.

Importantly, from an educational perspective, community-based projects like the CDP are an effective way for students to gain cross-disciplinary knowledge and skills and an appreciation of the interactive nature of the social and physical realms while making a meaningful and sustainable contribution to disadvantage communities.

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Table 1.   CDP Aims, Activities and Locations

CDP Aims	Activity/Initiative	Waterloo	Redfern	Sth Coogee	Menai	Chifley	Bonnyrigg	Other Estates	CD Training	DoH Liaison
Encourage community participation	On-site office	•			•	•				
	Social work student placements	•	•	•	•	•				•
	Design consultation	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		
	Community workshops	•	•	•	•	•	•			
	Community BBQs	•	•		•	•	•			
	Festivals and events	•	•							
	Collaborative meetings	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
	Training courses	•	•	•		•	•		•	•
	Community newsletter	•	•	•						
Identify and respond to community priorities	Community Workshops	•	•	•	•	•	•			
	Community surveys	•		•	•	•				
	Mapping/3D computer modelling	•	•	•						
	Handyman service	•								
	Community Action Planning			•	•	•				
	Strategic partnership plan									•
	Leadership/volunteer training	•	•	•		•			•	
	Community development training	•	•	•					•	•
Project resourcing and support	Community gardens	•	•							
	Cooking classes	•	•							
	Language classes	•	•							
	Kidspeak after school program & family support	•	•							
	Youth mentoring	•		•		•				
	Community Action Plan			•	•	•				
	Community newsletter	•	•	•						
	Estate renewal	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
	Families First			•	•	•				
	NGO evaluation				•					
	Tutoring support for school students	•	•		•					
	Research projects	•		•	•	•				
	Student placements	•	•	•	•	•				•
	3D spatial modelling	•		•						
	Auspicing volunteer training	•	•							
	Advocacy support	•	•	•	•	•				•
Collaboration with other organisations	Government Departments/Authorities	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		
	Regional social development agencies	•	•							
	Local government	•	•	•	•	•	•			
	Royal Botanical Gardens	•	•	•						
	Employment & training services	•								
	Ageing services	•	•							
	Local schools	•	•	•	•		•			
	Police	•	•	•	•	•	•			
	Technical and Further Education	•								
	Womens/family support services	•	•	•	•	•				
	Community centres	•		•		•				
Learning opportunities for all partners	Community surveys	•		•	•	•				
	Community workshops	•	•	•	•	•	•			
	Community newsletter	•	•	•						
	Design projects and reviews	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		
	Community development training program	•	•	•					•	•
	Leadership and volunteer training	•	•	•		•				
	Masters program in Community Development								•	•
	DoH/AHI professional development seminars									•

Table 2. Estimated Participation in CDP Projects by Public Housing Estate (1995-2006)

Public Housing Estate	Estate Population	No of Participants			
		Tenants	Students	DoH Staff	Agencies
Waterloo	5,500	350 (6%)	403	25	30
Redfern	2,200	100 (5%)	53	10	15
Sth Coogee	1,227	60 (5%)	80	10	7
Menai	785	30 (4%)	70	8	10
Namatjira Pl Chifley	240	30 (13%)	50	7	10
Bonnyrigg	3,300[1]	50 (2%)	15	3	3
Other estates[2]	Varies	5	10	6	0
Total	**13,252**	**625**	**681**	**69**	**75**

[1] Includes residents of 115 private dwellings in the estate area of 927 dwellings

[2] Some multi-estate projects include other estates