The Pitzer College 50th Anniversary Engaged Faculty Collection

Community Engagement & Activist Scholarship
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Edited by: Tessa Hicks Peterson
Contributions by: Erich Steinman, Scott Scoggins, Gina Lamb, Alexandra Juhasz,
Kathleen S. Yep, Susan A. Phillips, Paul Faulstich, Nigel Boyle, Mary Hatcher-
Skeers, Brinda Sarathy, Jose Calderon, Alan Jones
Engaging Students in Community-based Partnerships for Environmental Justice: Reflections on CCAEJ’s “Organizing Academy”

Brinda Sarathy, Associate Professor of Environmental Analysis

Organizing Academy Building Blocks

In the spring of 2012, three Claremont College professors came together to partake in a novel experiment—to engage our students in a cross-course, cross-college community engagement project with the Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice (CCAEJ), one of the oldest and most renowned environmental justice organizations in the Inland region of Southern California. Our community engagement effort, termed the “Organizing Academy,” represented a move to “scale up” our already existing relationships with CCAEJ and to tie undergraduate community-based work with critical classroom pedagogy. This may sound like an invitation to “herd cats,” and, at certain points in the semester, each of surely felt like we were trying to steer an amorphous and ambiguous mass! Yet, while the project itself entailed far more effort (and stress) than most traditional classes, the outcomes for students, professors and CCAEJ were worth it. In this essay, I briefly highlight the process and some lessons learned from the Organizing Academy and the importance of such efforts for institutions like Pitzer College, which value social responsibility and student engagement.

So, who constituted the band of intrepid instructors who ventured on this one-of-a-kind project? Rick Worthington, a professor of politics (Pomona College) who studies scientific expertise and participatory democracy, had a long-established relationship with CCAEJ and had connected various students to the organization for internships in past years. Brinda Sarathy, professor of environmental analysis (Pitzer College), taught classes on environmental justice (EJ) and was developing a new research agenda on toxics in Southern California. Like Worthington, Sarathy also had a developed relationship with CCAEJ. Finally, Gwen D’Arcangelis, professor of gender and women’s studies (at Scripps College during the time of this project), focuses her work on the politics of science, medicine and environment. Fortuitously, all three of us not only knew one another, but also just happened to be teaching courses on environmental justice in the same semester. At first, we informally shared our aspirations to broaden the consciousness of
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our respective students about issues of power and inequality and the struggles that groups of people have enacted to address these inequalities and achieve social justice. As we continued our conversations, however, an intersecting paradigm of critical pedagogies emerged. It gradually became apparent that we could pursue a cross-course collaboration that might both benefit our students and a community partner, CCAEJ. Indeed, each of us was already planning to incorporate some type of community-engaged work in our classes, and this was a chance to try and coordinate our efforts and goals.

Our intent was to promote the work of social justice by leveraging students’ skills—in writing, GIS and research, and their relatively privileged access to resources such as time, computers, data and scholarship—to facilitate community-identified agendas. To this end, student learning was dependent on a direct engagement with CCAEJ’s needs and demanded both flexibility and adapting to a lack of traditional classroom structure and expectations. Prior to identifying project areas for student engagement, we felt it was paramount to orient all of our students to some EJ issues in the Inland region and to also familiarize them with CCAEJ’s process of working with communities. To this end, students in our classes went on a CCAEJ-led “toxics tour” to visit and learn directly from impacted communities in Mira Loma (Riverside County) and the city of San Bernardino. The student reflection below highlights how this full-day toxics tour not only connected students with individual community members and their lived experiences, but also linked to theoretical concepts covered in class readings and provoked questions about barriers to justice.

“I found our toxic tour field trip to provide a necessary context for this week’s readings in the way that we could apply the theoretical parts of the articles to the reality of the Inland Empire. One aspect of the trip that particularly struck me is when one of the members of CCAEJ pointed out that they are not an environmental group, which is evidenced by their primary goal being to keep communities safe from exposure to toxic chemicals by ensuring various companies continue to build in the designated ‘industrial sites zone,’ as opposed to advocating for a rethinking of the need to continue building in general. While reading the United Church of Christ’s Toxic Wastes and Race concerning how minorities are not part of the environmental movement, I immediately thought of CCAEJ as an exception to that. This also led me to wonder how much of an obstacle the language barrier is for members of CCAEJ, given that they are a grass-roots organization and rely heavily on communicating with not only other community members, but also with the policy makers they are pushing for change.”

In addition to the toxics tour, CCAEJ’s executive director, Penny Newman, and staff member, Sylvia Betancourt, engaged our three classes in an “Organizing Academy” teaching module over the course of two separate weeks. Each of these sessions lasted three hours and represented a significant time commitment on the part of CCAEJ to impart to students a baseline understanding of their core values and organizing strategies. The in-class sessions with Newman also gave students the invaluable opportunity to directly engage with a veteran environmental justice organizer and be inspired by her stories of activism. In hindsight, these sessions quite brilliantly made students accountable for their upcoming projects, in ways that a simple grade at the end of class would never have. Community members and environmental justice activists had taken time out of their busy and burdened days to share experiences with undergraduate students, and almost everyone understood that their project work needed to “give back” in a meaningful and responsible way. Again, the student reflections on the in-class modules of the Organizing Academy, noted below, stress the lengths to which CCAEJ went to cultivate a relationship with students before assigning them to particular projects:

“Overall, I really admire the passion that both of the women from CCAEJ have, but most importantly, I admire how they refuse to step back and continue to pressure despite all the ridicule and disrespect they have encountered in efforts of providing a better environment for their community. I am looking forward to organizing and learning from them in hopes of implementing what I learn there in justice issues within my own community.”

“Another aspect of the academy that stood out to me was the model we analyzed; specifically, I was interested in the way organizers help develop policies from the ground up. Although in the grander scale it may seem as if some groups or organizations are not in support of affected communities, organizers such as CCAEJ have found ways to influence policy making by working with individuals within these agencies. Because these agencies may not be
in tune with the actual needs of communities, it is important that members have a voice in the decision-making process. Thus, building these relationships can also be a useful tool for organizers and supporters alike in helping shape policy that directly affect community members. Overall, I was really excited to learn so much from these women and about organizing in general.”

Organizing Academy Projects

Subsequent to the toxics tour and in-class Organizing Academy modules, we developed three kinds of projects (oral histories, policy research and community engagement), in collaboration with CCAEJ, through which to channel team-based student engagement, and which are outlined below. In talking to our respective classes, we were all very clear that this effort was not a traditional model of “service-learning,” but rather one of community engagement and community-based research. CCAEJ also made it known that they were organizationally over-extended, with a limited amount of time and staff to devote to supervising students. We thus asked that each student team delegate one point person/leader, who was charged with communicating between their teams and course professors and CCAEJ.

Oral histories (in-depth interviews) were modeled after a CCAEJ authored report on health and human rights in San Bernardino. The goal of gathering oral histories was to develop a similar report to highlight communities from throughout the Inland Valley. This set of projects included the following activities:

- Students developed a community map of their assigned area, identifying sites with high impacts or potential impacts to the community. This was through an interview with one or two community members at one time.

- In teams of two, students interviewed two community members from their assigned area:
  - Jurupa Valley
  - Moreno Valley
  - San Jacinto
  - Fontana
  - Perris
  - Norco
  - Bloomington

- Students profiled their assigned community, highlighting:
  - History
  - Demographic information (age, income, ethnicity, education)
  - Issues confronted by the community
  - Impacts to the community
  - Efforts to challenge those targeting the community
  - Community’s proposed solutions
  - Community’s vision for environmental justice

Policy research saw student teams analyze city general plans, air quality standards, and transportation policies and focus on one of the three following topics:

- Southern California Association of Governments – Regional Transportation Plan (SCAG – RTP)
  - East-West Corridor Route project
  - Routing truck traffic

- California Air Resources Board – State Implementation Plan (CARB – SIP)
  - Included rail locomotive idling rules
  - Truck-idling rules
  - Freight transport

- Land use in the Inland Valley
  - Map – included overlay of age, income, ethnicity, education
Communit engagement saw student teams assigned to individual organizers from CCAEJ and tasked with expanding community outreach about the growth of warehousing complexes and related traffic congestion. Students in this project worked on the following set of activities:

- **Students assisted in developing a Community Action Team (CAT) in Jurupa Valley**
  - Helped coordinate and outreach for a community workshop on land use decision-making
  - Mobilized residents to local planning commission/city council meeting

- **Community mapping: identified pollution sources near sensitive receptors (primarily warehouses)**
  - Demographic information (age, income, ethnicity, education)
  - Access to health care
  - Access to education
  - Access to green spaces/parks/libraries

- **Students kept weekly journals documenting:**
  - Reflections on community experiences
  - Observations
  - Activities undertaken to meet the project’s objectives

In total, the Organizing Academy resulted in a total of 41 students completing 12 oral histories of community members, three group-researched policy briefs and a community organizing effort in Jurupa Valley. In addition, three students from the Claremont Colleges went on to present their work on a panel at the Inland Valley Clean Air Summit in Riverside, Calif., in May 2012.

**Feedback Themes and Lessons Learned**

Highlighted below are two among several themes arising from student feedback on the Organizing Academy. Students’ comments reveal tensions resulting from the more fluid and unstructured nature of the project and their desire to start field-based engagement even earlier in the semester. In addition to suggestions for improving similar efforts in the future, students also note how community engagement transformed and deepened their understanding of environmental justice issues.

### Concerns about ambiguity, lack of structure

A consistent theme in students’ evaluation was their grappling with what they perceived as the Organizing Academy’s lack of structure and their related desire for greater predictability and clearer expectations. Student frustration about what they saw as “ambiguous” and “unstructured,” however, was partly related to the nature of community-engaged work itself. Indeed, students were in a position where their projects were contingent on the availability of community members and other key informants (for interviews, engagement efforts, policy overviews), and this necessitated coordinating logistics well in advance (vs. “last minute” planning), juggling a number of moving parts and remaining flexible. At the same time, student feedback indicates the importance of making more explicit from the get-go how and why the Organizing Academy would be quite different from typical classroom assignments and would require flexibility and significant investments in time and planning.

This recognition of the flexible and dynamic nature of the Organizing Academy—which was still moored within the context of a coordinated effort—might have allowed students to relax a bit more and get comfortable with what might be termed “productive and structured ambiguity.” Indeed, the last quote in this section reveals how at least one student team actively acquired skills in narrowing the focus and organizing of its efforts, largely fueled in the context of ambiguity.

“When we first started working with CCAEJ, I was very confused about what my group was actually supposed to be doing for them. I would say that one of the most stressful aspects of this project was the uncertainty.”

“Writing a report for an environmental justice organization is very different than a typical academic research paper, which is a good skill to have, but more guidance from them would have made my group more confident that our work was what they actually wanted and not just a waste of our time and their time.”

“When we were assigned our tasks, I saw that the structure was already a bit chaotic and disorganized. CCAEJ had planned more tasks
for our community engagement team than we ended up being able to accomplish. Evaluating the timescale and narrowing our focus in order to make our tasks achievable was my first lesson in community organizing. We narrowed our project to include the coordination and community outreach for the land-use workshop. I learned that it is important to have ideas for the larger long-term goal, but when there is a short period of time, it is needed to prioritize, instead of spreading yourself thin across too many goals. I also learned that the first step to community organizing is to organize yourself and your group.

Direct engagement as transformational

The majority of students had never before had direct experiences with community organizing or conducting oral history interviews. The Organizing Academy thus generated numerous student reflections on how the very process of engaging with community members had profound impacts on their understanding of environmental justice. In the following quotes, students note how they developed new skills through doing fieldwork and how on-the-ground activities allowed them to use their “brains in less familiar and more challenging ways.” Others reflect on how their understanding of social positionality and privilege took on a new meaning in the context of their team projects. Even the challenge and discomfort embedded in the research process proved fruitful for individuals, as they saw value in the opportunity to get out of the “Claremont bubble”:

“This project was my first experience in community organizing. I hadn’t realized, prior to getting into the project, that community organizing draws on extremely important personal and group work skills. This experience gave me the opportunity to pull myself out of my heavily academic-focused life. It allowed me to use my brain in a way that was unfamiliar and challenging. These tasks applied to the world outside of the academic institution. Community organizing with CCAEJ was a meaningful experience for me because my actions had at least somewhat of an effect on the Jurupa Valley community. I also learned that while doing community organizing, your expectations are always shifting and changing, and you have to learn to be flexible and creative.”

“Forming relationships with the women at CCAEJ brought up personal issues and thoughts about class, race, privilege and positionality. It became clear that the dominant power structures’ means of oppression, which can seem very much intangible to me, were a significant part of the individual and social histories of the people in Jurupa Valley. My experience of showing up as an outsider to a community that has been marginalized by the same forces that have privileged me was at times awkward, unsettling and uncomfortable. Understanding and addressing positionality was something I confronted while doing research for my independent study project in Nepal. However, I felt a slightly different experience in Jurupa Valley. After giving this some thought, it may have been the fact that we both live in the United States and that we live so close to each other, only 30 minutes apart, but have had drastically different life experiences. It forced me to begin to confront those issues in a personal way. But the women we grew to know were more than welcoming. They showed us how each of us had different tools to offer to the group and how we could learn from one another.”

“This experience gave me the chance to interact and work alongside people who have had firsthand experience with environmental injustice. I particularly got a lot out of working with the women on the Riverside Team. Being able to hear their stories, experiences and narratives, brought to life the theoretical environmental justice literature. Being a part of the community organizers’ determination and hard work was inspiring. Despite the challenges and difficulties we faced, my work with CCAEJ felt important because I was part of a larger effort to address issues of environmental justice. I think helping initiate the partnership between students and community activists is going to be an important aspect of Environmental Analysis majors’ education and will hopefully contribute to the efforts of CCAEJ.”

“I do not consider this discomfort a pitfall of the project. Quite to the contrary, I thought that this was an excellent way to contextualize the theoretical and often broad concepts of environmental justice. Additionally, being thrust into these situations granted me the opportunity to escape the “Claremont bubble,” which tends to divorce our collegiate, egalitarian ideals from reality. For instance, upon first coming to this class, I had been expecting
issues of environmental justice to focus mostly upon environmental toxins in marginalized communities. As I’ve learned through my fieldwork, however, environmental justice goes beyond toxins and siting controversies; rather, it provides another way of framing issues of disempowerment in a community. In real-world situations, what we as students might identify as being a hazard to surrounding environmental and human health might be seen by community activists as an opportunity to organize around a central threat to a community’s ambient, economic and physical well-being.”

Closing Thoughts

It is clear that opportunities like the Organizing Academy allow Pitzer and other Claremont College students to engage in local environmental justice issues in ways that are deeply meaningful and enriching. Yet, in order to benefit student learning, such projects demand a great deal on the part of involved faculty and community organizations. As faculty members, we all spent late nights and long hours trouble-shooting, coordinating logistics and working to maintain open lines of communication and trust. All this, of course, was in addition to the “normal” preparation for our respective weekly seminars. Successful partnerships thus entail tremendous behind-the-scenes effort, which may go unacknowledged by the institution. Fortunately, at Pitzer, faculty members have access to resources such as the Community Engagement Center, which strive to support and recognize the value of community partnerships (Pomona College, similarly, has the Draper Center). At the end of the day, though, for faculty to pursue the balancing act of community-engaged work, these efforts need to be acknowledged beyond the realm of institutional public relations and carry weight in the arena of review and promotion.

Finally, while community-engagement projects tend to enhance student learning, they do not necessarily or automatically benefit community members and organizations. Indeed, all of us (three professors and CCAEJ staff) were keenly aware of this possibility and only committed to this partnership on the premise that student projects would be driven by and help address needs identified by CCAEJ and the communities with whom they worked. Fortunately, the final projects did enhance CCAEJ’s work, as student research was selectively incorporated into CCAEJ organizational documents, and helped inform community-based campaigns and workshops. The price of this success, however, was major investments in time and effort on the part of faculty and organizational staff.

In one of our final debriefs on the Organizing Academy, CCAEJ staff and D’Arcangelis, Sarathy and Worthington collaboratively concluded that the logistics and resources needed to sustain such a multi-course, cross-college effort were significant and likely not feasible in the long-run. Moreover, the playing field had shifted since the start of the Organizing Academy in January 2012. CCAEJ, for instance, had commenced on a longer process of internal reorganization and strategic planning and no longer had the capacity to sponsor another such effort in the near future. D’Arcangelis was leaving the Claremont Colleges altogether for another academic position, and Worthington and Sarathy had new work-related responsibilities on their plates. Our final debrief was thus a closing, but only of sorts. Largely as a result of engaging in the Organizing Academy, Sarathy was asked by Penny Newman to serve on the board of CCAEJ. D’Arcangelis also came to join the board the following year. Similarly, Worthington continues to support and engage with CCAEJ through his classes and extra-curricular commitments. Moreover, our respective classes still go on toxics tours and channel our student efforts towards community engagement partnerships when feasible. Most importantly, we all continue to pursue social justice agendas in our scholar-activism. At the end of the day, like the Organizing Academy itself, one of the greatest lessons of this project has been learning to be adaptable, to go with the flow and to change or let go as needed.
Jose Calderon’s Reflective Review of Brinda Sarathy’s Essay

In this article, Brinda Sarathy, like in all her work, explores creative ways of exposing others to forms of exploitative power relations that manifest themselves in quality of life issues. In her book *Pineros*, she tackled a “frontier area” of research by exposing the social, political and economic marginalization of Latino forest workers, many of them undocumented, on federal lands.

In this article, she describes a “frontier area” of pedagogy to engage students with “one of the oldest and renowned environmental justice organizations in the Inland region of Southern California.” And because the “experiment” is to find new ways to connect the student’s learning of writing, GIS and research and knowledge of technology to community engagement, it has the aspects of creating a culture where the learning has to be both flexible and unstructured. There is no better way to make learning real than to take the students outside the classroom and to have them experience what they have been reading about. There is no better way to teach about the destructive aspects of industrialization than to take students on “toxic tours.” This is what I do when I take students to learn about the conditions of farm workers and the movements they developed in Delano, California. But, as Brinda describes in her article, a tour is only a beginning in moving to higher levels of engagement. It is much more meaningful when students can meet those who are not only knowledgeable about the causes for the degradation of the environment but who are also passionately doing something about it. It is often life-changing for students to meet someone like the environmental activist described in this article who shared her stories and her passion of activism. Certainly, passion is a key part of the life of an environmental organizer but so is “giving back” to the community. For a scholar activist, the question of how to “give back” to the community is always an ongoing question. How do I use my skills and my abilities, not to exploit my community, but to use pedagogy as a form of empowerment? This article provides an example of how one can go beyond traditional service learning to the use of community-engaged and community-based research projects that can lay the foundations for social change through mapping and analyzing city general plans, air quality standards and transportation policies. This type of research and learning becomes contributory when it is coupled with principles and values that place the quality of life over the quantity of profit. Further, it is contributory and clears a path in a “frontier area” when community engagement moves to the level of action—as in the example where students worked alongside CCAEJ organizers and carried out concrete community outreach on issues of growth, congestion and land use. It is contributory when there are outcomes (such as journals, oral histories and policy briefs) that add to the community’s knowledge and to its potential for transformative change. It is contributory, as, in this case, where the research was “selectively incorporated into CCAEJ organizational documents, and helped inform community-based campaigns and workshops.” It is contributory, as the authors have done here by continuing as supporters and board members of CCAEJ, and when the commitment as scholar activists is made for the long run with social justice agendas. Indeed, as the article describes, this type of pedagogy tends to be fluid and unstructured. It has to be if it is scientific. After all, what is science all about? It is about diagnosing a problem, prescribing a solution to that problem, and ultimately implementing an action to the problem. It is in the implementation of the action where something new is created. It is here where we do not know what is going to happen. This is the beauty of what stands out in this article—where experimentation is taking place in a frontier area of combining the academic with applied research—and the outcome of this “community engagement” is described by the students as transforming and deepening “their understanding of environmental justice issues.”

Unfortunately, as the article mentions at the end, the significance of this type of creative and engaged pedagogy is often ignored or marginalized in academia. There is a step that we, as scholar activists all are still striving for: that of academia recognizing, validating, evaluating and rewarding community-based research and engagement as both an applied and scholarly enterprise.