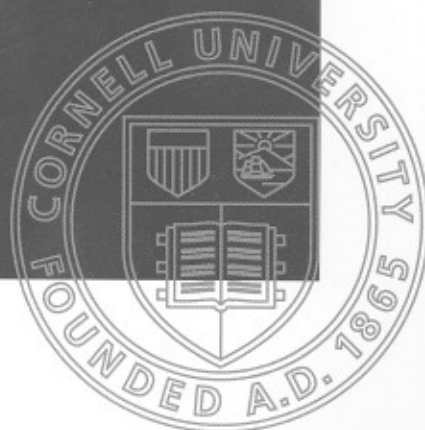


**EXTENDING
OUR REACH**

VOICES OF
SERVICE
LEARNING
AT CORNELL



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We must begin with what concerns the student most deeply. We must proceed in such a way and with such materials as to enable him [sic] to gain increasingly rational insight into these concerns.

- C. Wright Mills 1954

Introduction

Prior to my coming to Cornell University, I worked in the Research and Scientific Exchanges Division of the International Cooperation and Development branch of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Foreign Agricultural Service. While in this position, I became involved in trying to understand why minorities and urban students were increasingly less inclined to go on and study natural resources or agriculture in colleges or universities. One programmatic response to this concern was the TEACH US Program (Teaching Educators Agriculture and Conservation Holistically for Urban Society), an agriculture literacy and outreach program targeting traditionally under-represented groups. Through international study tours that focused upon diverse agricultural and natural resource management problems and practices, the program aimed to increase enthusiasm and understanding about agricultural disciplines among U.S. minority teachers who work in urban settings. This was based on our belief that teachers influenced student interest. So, if we could help urban and minority teachers become more interested in natural resources and agriculture, they would in turn ensure that more urban and minority students would become interested in natural resources and agriculture.

Though the program was a success, no conclusive evidence emerged to indicate whether urban and minority students were more or less likely to pursue careers in natural resources or agriculture if their teachers had been involved in the TEACH US program. At the time I suspected that this was due to scale issues; not enough teachers were involved in TEACH US to make a difference. I now believe that, though TEACH US may have succeeded in helping teachers overcome their own biases against natural resources and agricultural topics, TEACH US did not and could not get to the deeper matter, that for urban students, the relevance of natural resources and agriculture to their every day lives is often at best an abstraction. This had important ramifications for me at that time, and today. We are now crossing the threshold of our urban future. More than half of the world's population can be considered urban. Urban centers are where the future producers and



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consumers are, where the future policy makers are, and where the potential for solutions to the great problems of our time are likely hiding. Given the critical importance of agricultural and other natural resources to the survival of our species, it is at our own peril that we neglect urban populations and allow agriculture and natural resources to remain nebulous abstractions, especially when it comes to engaging urban and minority youth in these subjects.

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Much has been written about our urban future, and many have speculated on the implications of urbanization to both natural resources and human affairs. Though I am not naïve to the threat of unplanned urban sprawl and how it chews up both functioning pristine landscapes and human-shaped working landscapes, it seems the dialogue is at times unnecessarily one-sided and unfortunately deficit-based. Might there be under-appreciated assets within urban communities, overlooked opportunities within the process of urbanization? Couldn't the urban confluence of capital and "community" be harnessed as a force for ecological restoration? What would happen if one could discover a portal into Aldo Leopold's land ethic for urban dwellers? What would happen if the next generation of land use planners and natural resource managers made conscious, explicit efforts to understand urban systems as socio-ecological systems? How and where would these future planners and resource managers be trained?

It was while musing about these nagging questions, and recognizing the irony of their importance juxtaposed with the likelihood of my answering them, that a serendipitous moment befell me. I remember it clearly. I was at that moment serving on a panel of judges, with the job of providing constructive feedback and ranking graduate presentations. My colleague Dr. Marianne Krasny said she wanted to talk to me about the possibility of organizing a course around an Alternative Spring Breaks trip to New York City. Initially I was skeptical, but holding the above questions in my head, I told her I would think about it. Meanwhile, she would put me in touch with the students who were interested in organizing the course.

The students met with me the following week and made an impassioned plea for consideration. Their ideas were salient, though slightly unfocused. One of the students' points was, "how can we talk about *sustainability* without talking about *cities*?" I agreed with him, and felt that "dawning of recognition" feeling—could this be the opportunity to delve into the big questions? I challenged him on the public service side, playing devil's advocate: "Don't you think anything we do in only four or five days will just be spitting in the wind? What makes us think that we Cornellians dropping in for a few days to fix the 'unsustainable urban problems' of New York City are even wanted, or will be accepted?" His answer was thoughtful, and set the course for what is now the "Urban Environments" class. He said, "The most important thing is for our group to balance what and how we learn to care about urban sustainability with what the groups we work with get out of our

being there. We have to be humble, and we have to keep our eyes on reciprocity."

Since that conversation in late 2004, the Urban Environments course has been offered by the Cornell Department of Natural Resources each spring. Each year the course is tweaked and improved through the feedback of students as well as through the feedback of the community organizations we work with while in New York City over Spring Break. The course is intended to be a broad survey of urban environmental and natural resources challenges, seen through the lens of primarily one city, New York. The course features modules on the meaning of 'urban,' urban horticulture and forestry, urban wildlife and fisheries, urban ecology, urban environmental design, urban environmental education, urban community greening, urban environmental justice, and urban sustainability.

Urban Environments Service-Learning as Praxis

Service-learning, whether in urban or other contexts, is only one of several pedagogies that situates learners in an organized service activity to meet community needs and enhance community assets, including volunteerism, service activities by student organizations, consulting projects, and internships (Parker-Gwin & Mabry 1998; Hiromimus-Wendt & Lovell-Troy, 1999; Liddicoat et al., 2007). A distinction can be made between service-learning and volunteerism in that service-learning is more highly structured in form and involves the deliberate integration of aspects of the service activity into the course content and curricular activities. This leads to "a teaching and learning approach that integrates community service with academic study to enrich learning, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities" (Fiske, 2001). On the other hand, service-learning differs from internships in that it is less structured, and it assumes the role of a supplement to the course content, rather than being the primary focus of the course (Hiromimus-Wendt & Lovell-Troy, 1999).

This pedagogy seems especially attractive to those who approach natural resources from a social science context for three reasons. First, it has its origins in a long tradition of activist community sociology based on the perspective of the Chicago School (Pestello et al., 1996; Hiromimus-Wendt and Lovell-Troy, 1999). Second, to the degree that we validate experience as one among many sources of knowledge, service-learning provides an additional way to educate learners about society by providing them with "real world" experiences in the context of anthropological, sociological and other analyses (Kolb, 1984; Hiromimus-Wendt & Lovell-Troy, 1999). Finally, it furthers the goals of social justice and the development of our students into citizen-scholars, consistent with the critical sociology paradigm (Myers-Lipton, 1998; Hiromimus-Wendt & Lovell-Troy, 1999).

According to Eyler & Giles, 1999, "service-learning is a form of experiential education where learning occurs through a cycle of action and reflection

as students work with others through a process of applying what they are learning to community problems and, at the same time, reflecting upon their experience as they seek to achieve real objectives for the community and deeper understanding and skills for themselves." In its most common and simple form, and in our Urban Environments class, service-learning generally consists of the following components: (1) learners are either required or offered the opportunity to participate in supplemental or "co-curricular" service-related activities; (2) the instructors deliberately choose participating sites so as to maximize the likelihood that learners will encounter community members actively immersed in issues related directly to the course content; and (3) learners must intentionally "reflect on" or analyze their service-related observations and experiences (commonly called "journaling" or in our case, "blogging"). The "praxis" implication of service-learning is an additional aspect of the journaling activity, wherein learners are encouraged to attempt to make connections between theoretical ideas found in the course materials and their practical or "real world" experiences derived through service activities.

Beyond the three basic components of a service-learning program, standards for service-learning include such principles as:

cooperation with the community in the selection of activities in order to appreciate community assets or fulfill community needs better

reciprocal learning in which both students and community people act as partners in a participatory educational process

a blurring of the walls between the academy and the community through co-curricular requirements

structured critical reflection

opportunities for community members to define their own needs

and participation by and with diverse populations (National Society for Experiential Education 1993).

When setting up service-learning experiences, Mintz and Hesser (1996) and Parker-Gwin and Mabry (1998) point out that we must create situations of true collaboration, wherein colleges, the community, students and faculty members all benefit in reciprocal and equal ways. While student learning is central to the mission of colleges and universities, reciprocal relationships with people from the community ensure that the needs, concerns, and assets of all participants become pivotal to the collaborations (Hiromimus-Wendt & Lovell-Troy, 1999; Krasny & Tidball, in review). And of course, faculty members benefit through an enrichment of their courses and through the process of learning from neighborhood residents the reality of life in communities outside the academy. Ultimately, as a consequence of the "immediacy of experience" service-learning provides, these experiences are

"likely to be personally meaningful to participants and to generate emotional consequences, to challenge values as well as ideas, and hence to support social, emotional and cognitive learning and development" (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

Why it Matters to Me

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On one level, it matters that the course I teach provides learners the opportunity to be surprised about what urban environments have to offer, instead of only hearing the gloom and doom of built environments. I feel it is important to help students see something new in places that they have taken for granted. It is also no coincidence that many of the students who enroll in my class are from large cities and/or are minorities. Through the blogging, one gets the sense that many of the students feel conflicted, that on one hand they want to be loyal to their cities, their neighborhoods, but on the other hand, they are aware that cities are generally thought of as "anti-natural" and so they should be hostile towards them like their peers who are often fans of more pristine environments. Through their service, learners are able to gain new perspectives about the city, often *their* city, and their potential role in their community towards sustainability.

On a deeper level, Aldo Leopold's land ethic must be accessible to urban populations, so that both cities and the countryside, and even the wild places, have a future. While "Urban Environments" doesn't teach that the city's socio-ecological system is equal in species diversity, habitat value, or aesthetic worth to the Amazon rainforest or the Arctic Tundra, it does allow for the possibility that a city's socio-ecological system, if managed to provide optimum human habitat, might allow for more species diversity in cities, and would certainly present less of a threat to the charismatic systems mentioned above. To be able to engage students and to encourage them to consider the assets of cities, the ways in which urban dwellers can and do contribute to sustainability (albeit in small and imperfect ways) and the ways that those small and imperfect efforts by urban dwellers to achieve sustainability could be amplified through community efforts and civic ecology education is exciting. To actually facilitate students' work with urban residents in this effort is truly rewarding.

The true testament of the worth of Urban Environments, at least to me, is what the students do with their experience as they move on in their academic careers and beyond. Many of the students involved in Urban Environments have gone on to do impressive urban planning, urban ecology, environmental justice, or other related work in a service capacity. Though I am not so naïve or so arrogant as to think that students who have passed through Urban Environments and gone on to distinguish themselves did so only as a result of their participation in this class, I do believe it is not entirely coincidental that a list of alumni of the Urban Environments course reads as a "who's who in campus activism and engagement," especially dealing with sustainability

and the environment. I am proud of what these young people are doing, how they are distinguishing themselves and doing so with a service ethic. I also take pride in the knowledge that I had a chance to walk Central Park and Harlem and Ground Zero and Battery Park City with these future leaders, and to work with them in community gardens and memorial forests, linking natural resources with urban issues, whether they be economic, political, or structural. Some day I will work with them in service to humanity again, probably where humanity is most concentrated, in cities.

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