COMPARATIVE COLLECTIVE COMMUNITY-BASED LEARNING: THE "POSSIBILITIES FOR CHANGE IN AMERICAN COMMUNITIES" PROGRAM*

This article introduces an approach to service learning based on students’ collective engagement with a range of community organizations. We explore the particular benefits of this comparative collective community-based (CCC) learning model through a discussion of the "Possibilities for Change in American Communities" program, which was begun by the authors in 2001. The program exposes students to a diverse set of community contexts by integrating a 32-day sleeper-bus trip around the eastern half of the U.S. into a year-long curriculum. We discuss the distinct advantages of such a program as well as the tradeoffs associated with the comparative analysis of multiple communities. We conclude by exploring alternative ways to incorporate the CCC framework within more conventional community-based initiatives.

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FOR SOCIOLOGISTS, teaching in a classroom has certain inherent limitations, as the discipline is firmly rooted in analyses of the interpersonal, institutional, and macro-level relations that constitute the world “out there.” To directly engage with the people and places that generally serve as the “material” for classroom learning, and to gain a deeper understanding of the local bases for social movement activity, we designed “Possibilities for Change in Amer-

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severo, Sarah Boonin, Liz Theoharis, Neil Kiekhofer, John Tye, Tywanna Taylor, Sam Knight, and Stanley Dearman. The program itself would not have been possible without the tireless work of Barb Browning, nor the patience, good humor, and trust exhibited by the students who participated in its inaugural version during the summer of 2001. A more detailed account of this trip can be found on the program website: http://www.brandeis.edu/departments/sociology/bus. Please address all correspondence to David Cunningham, Department of Sociology, Brandeis University, MS 071, Waltham, MA 02454-9110; e-mail: dcunning@brandeis.edu.

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perience of learning becomes an active product of our collective energies and undertakings rather than the result of experiences and ideas abstracted from any full social context. In our view, engaging directly with subjects of interest is an essential step in the learning process. In itself, this position is not terribly innovative; it is common in the current pedagogical literature to view learning as more effective when students actively participate in the transmission of information (Boyer 1997; Collier and Morgan 2002; Dewey 1938; Marullo 1998). This general insight has led to the privileging of cooperative learning techniques over more traditional passive learning (lecturing) models (Goldsmid and Wilson 1980; Johnson et al. 1981; McKeachie 1994). But leaving the traditional classroom altogether to visit a wide range of communities, speak to their residents, and work with their local organizations provides an extension to this move toward active, engaged learning. This sort of model fits roughly under the “service learning” umbrella in the literature (Mooney and Edwards 2001), though we distinguish it from the range of existing out-of-class experiences by referring to it more specifically as comparative collective community-based (CCC) learning.

Second, the topic of social movements is especially well suited to leaving the classroom (Cornelius 1998; Lofland 1996; Marullo and Edwards 2000; Reger and Dugan 2001). While the primary benefit of similar courses has come from students’ immersion in the day-to-day activities of social movement organizations (SMOs), our CCC model is predicated on a comparative approach, focused on providing students with direct exposure to a wide range of groups. Seeing the activities of many of these groups firsthand, as well as how they connect with their respective local communities, yields several payoffs. Most centrally, this approach allows us to understand how these groups’ grievances, orientations, and activities are intimately tied to their local surroundings. Examining an array of movements within their local contexts allows us to connect elements of community structure to the emergence of collective action within areas that, more often than not, look very different from students’ home or campus environments. While visiting many communities within a short period of time precludes meaningful embeddedness within any particular setting, this design does facilitate comparative connections and reinforce the general insight that action is deeply tied to social context.

In this paper, we promote a more active form of sociology education, one that breaks down the walls that often separate the classroom from our subjects of inquiry. Such goals are certainly in the vein of service learning models, though we supplement a move toward community-based learning with a model that provides a direct and constant vehicle for assessing the work of SMOs in the context of our own collective experiences. The CCC learning model is also predicated upon group engagement with a broad range of local communities, with an emphasis on thinking comparatively across varied contexts. We fully realize that the sort of traveling program described below is not feasible in many (or even likely in most) cases. Such a program requires a high level of commitment from both instructors and students and is both logistically complicated and costly to implement. However, our goal is not to convince others to block out a month of time and commandeer the Beastie Boys’ tour bus for their classes so much as it is to present a case study illustrating the benefits of CCC learning programs. We see this general approach as fruitful for a wide range of courses but especially well suited to those focused on activism, community organizing, social movements, and social change.

In the next section, we discuss the Possibilities for Change program in more detail and then tie it to the pedagogical literature concerned with cooperative learning and service learning. Having made a case for CCC learning generally, we then focus on how such a program oriented around the
theme of social change achieved results far beyond what would have been possible if we had spent an equivalent amount of time in class on campus. We conclude by discussing how a range of issues—including student embeddedness within community settings, their reciprocal relationships with resident "hosts," and overall feasibility of the program's structure—bear upon the implementation of the CCC model.

"THE CLASS ON WHEELS": POSSIBILITIES FOR CHANGE IN AMERICAN COMMUNITIES

Possibilities for Change is a yearlong program in the Department of Sociology at Brandeis University. The program, organized and run by the authors and doctoral student Barb Browning, consists of a two-course sequence offered on campus, supplemented by a month-long trip around the eastern half of the United States on a sleeper bus during the summer. The central goal of the travel component is to allow students to actively engage with individuals and organizations attempting to change established ways of viewing the world and to experience firsthand the neighborhoods and communities that serve as the context for their efforts.

The program begins with a course taught during the spring semester before our departure on the bus. The class itself serves three central functions. First, and primarily, it introduces ideas related to community structure, collective action, and social change. These ideas are continually revisited and applied during our travels, but here we make use of class readings and group discussion to create a common base of knowledge. Our general focus is on the makeup of different communities as well as how the structure of each type of community can be altered through the efforts of particular models of activist organization. To these ends, we examine how community-level processes—including residential segregation, school districting, and the policing of public space—create and sustain inequalities between racial, ethnic, and class groups. We then introduce a set of historical and contemporary movements that have successfully worked to reduce these systematic inequalities, focusing on the various strategies and tactics utilized by each group as well as its orientation to the broader community. The second goal of this spring course is to collectively participate in a range of group-building exercises, many of which ideally are organized and run by the students, to create a positive and supportive environment to facilitate our intense time together on the road. We also use our time together to finalize our itinerary and prepare ourselves for the central component of Possibilities for Change: 32 days of sleeper-bus travel around the eastern half of the United States.

The travel route for the 2001 version of the program (which departed on May 27 and returned on June 27) was roughly a clockwise loop around the eastern half of the country—first heading southward down the East coast, across the deep South to New Orleans, then following the Mississippi River northward before heading east to return to campus. The route was designed with two things in mind. First, we wanted to visit as wide a range of communities as possible, consistent with our overall strategy of comparatively examining the contexts within which change occurs. Toward this end, we spent time in large urban areas (New York; Philadelphia; Washington, DC; Atlanta; and New Orleans), "typical" suburbs (such as Levittown, PA, and Celebration, FL), and sparsely populated rural communities (including Princeville, NC; Newbern, AL; and Philadelphia, MS).

These communities were selected to represent the diversity of the American experience but also to meet our second goal: to provide an opportunity to expose students to, and engage in, a range of community-based work. Our aim was not to passively study communities and organizations but to integrate ourselves as best we could in their perspectives and activities. The range of
groups we selected was purposely broad and included direct service, advocacy, and community organizing ventures. During the month, we cooked and distributed meals with Food Not Bombs in Chapel Hill, NC, spoke out for gun control legislation at CNN’s “Talk Back Live” show in Atlanta, GA, stuffed envelopes to support Sister Helen Prejean’s Moratorium Campaign in New Orleans, helped to restore a house with Habitat for Humanity in Baton Rouge, LA, lobbied our Congressional representatives in Washington, DC, and helped recruit participants in the Kensington Welfare Rights Union’s battle for affordable housing and health care in Philadelphia, PA. In addition, we met with many other participants in past and current activist efforts and had several noted scholars speak on topics ranging from Black Power movements to the political aspects of community-planning efforts. We also visited historically important sites—including the King Center for Non-Violent Change in Atlanta, the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, AL, and the Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church in Montgomery, AL—and participated in several community events, from the “Youth Culture Against the Police State” anti-police brutality gathering in Greensboro, NC, to a Pride Festival in Birmingham, AL, to a “Take Back the Streets” event in Washington, DC.

To many of the people we met along the way, our mode of travel was more interesting than the places we had seen. A sleeper bus is something used mostly by bands or touring theater groups—the buses stand out due to their large size (ours was 40 feet long and 12 ½ feet tall), lack of windows, and generally gaudy artwork (ours was brown with airbrushed tigers on the sides and rear). Considering the space constraints, the interior is quite comfortable. Immediately behind the driver is a front sitting room complete with couch, cushioned seats, and card table, as well as a small refrigerator, microwave, television, VCR, stereo, and very small bathroom (with sink but no shower). The center of the bus has two sleeping compartments, each equipped with six bunk beds stacked three-high from floor to ceiling. The compartments are fairly comfortable, if a bit claustrophobic (there is about eight inches of space—“two fists worth,” as several of the students thought of it—above one’s head). The back of the bus contains a second small sitting room with another couch, card table with cushioned seats, television, VCR, and stereo. Overall, we were able to sleep 14 and live on the bus for the month, and most would tell you that they would do it again!

Why teach the class aboard a sleeper bus? We feel that this mode of travel offers several distinct advantages over other forms of transportation. Not only does combining our accommodations with our means of transportation save money, it allows us to do much of our travel at night while we sleep. As a result, we spend most of our waking hours at our destinations rather than in transit. It is also a tested form of travel for a class like ours—throughout the 1990s, Douglas Brinkley had successfully taught his “Majic Bus” American history courses at Hofstra University and later the University of New Orleans (for an account of their first trip, see Brinkley 1993) in a sleeper bus much like the one described here. Finally, as the program is intimately tied to social change in America, a bus seems to connect with a range of populist cultural images—from the Montgomery boycott and the Freedom Rides during the Civil Rights Movement to Ken Kesey’s magic bus, Furthur, to the ongoing cross-country jaunts of the Green Tortoise bus company. Indeed, while the automobile best represents our desire for autonomy and individualism in transit, the bus symbolizes a community-based mode of travel, consistent with the “collective” focus of the program.

During the trip, our focus is primarily group-oriented, both in our work with community organizations and with our mode of teaching and learning. While the spring course introduces a range of concepts and theoretical approaches within a fairly traditional lecture/discussion format, during the
trip we engage with this material in a collective, egalitarian manner. Students are encouraged to share reactions with the group during nightly discussion/reaction sessions, with instructors playing a more facilitative role to draw out insights and connect ideas to course material. This approach fits well with the structure of our living space, the concentrated periods of time spent together (though we also benefited from incorporating unstructured blocks of time in particular communities for independent work and exploration), and our method of direct interaction with communities. We revisit its implications for student learning below.

Additionally, each student is responsible for pursuing an individual project. We allow students to choose project topics based on their own interests—a sampling of these would include the development of activist institutions in Latino communities, how class dynamics play out within institutional settings, and the role of food in contemporary social life. To these ends, much of our free time in various communities is filled with students interviewing residents, visiting local institutions, and taking photos related to their topics of choice. Completing these projects is the central task of the fall semester course, which is the third and final component of the program. The class meets as a full group once a week, and we engage in several exercises designed to further reflect upon our experiences and findings as well as provide opportunities for periodic student presentations of work-in-progress to solicit feedback from the group as a whole.

There are several logistic challenges tied to this sort of venture. First, the intensive summer portion of the program does not fit neatly into normal faculty teaching schedules. At Brandeis, students earn two courses' worth of credit for the program as a whole. This credit formally comes from the spring and fall courses, which avoids bureaucratic difficulties associated with connecting the program to the university's Summer School (which in our case is a separately funded entity, requiring its own tuition payments). We assign grades to the students after each semester, with participation in the summer traveling component required for successful completion of the program. The professor and graduate students each receive a salary and per diem costs for running the summer component, though this portion of the program—unlike the spring and fall courses—does not count toward the faculty member's teaching load.

Second, there is the crucial task of selecting students for the program. In 2001, we advertised widely and quickly found that the supply of interested students dwarfed the number of available slots. There was no flexibility with class size (we could sleep no more than 14 on the bus), so we designed a two-step selection process. Students first fill out a detailed application form, which includes information about their background and a brief essay about why they want to take part in the program. We use this information to narrow the pool down to 40 candidates, each of whom then come in for an interview. The final selection of students is largely based on these interviews, with our aim being a diverse group whose backgrounds and strengths complement each other during our time together. Ultimately, we found this method to be successful; the fact that students "on the bus" were of differing age (from first-years to juniors), academic major (about half had some prior sociology background, but we also selected students majoring in computer science, economics, art, and history), regional background, ethnicity, and personality type (we quickly realized that having 12 dynamic campus leaders in such close quarters would be a recipe for friction, if not disaster) broadened the range of reactions and responses to each experience, causing everyone in the group to more fully examine how their ideals and attitudes were tied to their own histories.

Finally, perhaps the largest issue with implementing this sort of traveling course is financial. The program's total operating costs—including bus rental, driver accommodations, gas, insurance, and instructor
salaries—exceed $30,000. Over two-thirds of this figure is for the bus itself; typical sleeper-bus rental packages include a licensed driver, fuel, maintenance, and insurance. Given the fact that the cost of the bus and other program expenses approaches $2,500 per enrolled student, we felt strongly that having students shoulder the financial burden would drastically reduce the range of potential participants, so we solicited outside funding sources. At all stages, our university administration was highly supportive of the endeavor and ultimately supplied much of our needed funding. In return, the program has brought considerable publicity to the university. During the trip, we were featured in many local newspapers as well as The New York Times and a televised CNN news segment. While only a small number of students directly participate in the program, we strive to connect our efforts to the broader campus community through a website that we update from the road daily and a series of student forums designed to create and sustain alliances with members of social justice-oriented campus organizations.

SITUATING “POSSIBILITIES FOR CHANGE” IN THE COOPERATIVE-AND SERVICE-LEARNING TRADITIONS

In many ways, this program fits nicely within the agenda of conventional service learning programs. Such programs have a long history, harking back to the days of John Dewey and early Chicago School community research, when teachers and scholars first clearly advocated for directly connecting students to the world they seek to understand and act within. Dewey (1938) himself famously suggested that students could learn better by “doing,” by focusing on thought and action together. The underlying idea behind this effort, and the innumerable service learning programs that have followed, is that students are better able to learn if they are actively engaged in the learning process. In its broadest conception, then, service learning is an umbrella term for a range of programs that somehow provide students with a more active role in their learning. How this might occur varies, and there has been a proliferation of recent efforts against simply equating service learning with any out-of-classroom experience.

Indeed, as the number of programs with self-identified service learning components has exploded over the last 10 years (Collier and Morgan 2002), the “conceptual imprecision” that surrounds what such programs actually entail has grown (Everett 1998; Hinck and Brandell 2000; Mintz and Hesser 1996). In an attempt to bring some order to the field—where activities as varied as field trips, internships, co-ops, individuals volunteering for credit, and full class participation in local community organizations have all fallen under the rubric of service learning—Mooney and Edwards (2001) have usefully developed a two-dimensional typology for what they refer to as Community Based Learning (CBL) options. In their formulation, six distinct categories of CBLs (out-of-class activities, volunteering, service add-ons, internships, service learning, and service-learning advocacy) are differentiable by their incorporation of some combination of six attributes (connection to off-campus communities, the rendering of service, the granting of curricular credit, the application of skills, structured reflection, and social action). These CBL categories are nested, meaning that “moving from out-of-class activities to service-learning advocacy increases the structure and complexity of the learning experience as well as students’ commitment to individuals and organizations” (Mooney and Edwards 2001:184-5).

In this sense, less complex categories incorporate fewer attributes: out-of-class activities to service-learning advocacy increase the structure and complexity of the learning experience as well as students' commitment to individuals and organizations” (Mooney and Edwards 2001:184-5). In this sense, less complex categories incorporate fewer attributes: out-of-class activities to service-learning advocacy increase the structure and complexity of the learning experience as well as students' commitment to individuals and organizations” (Mooney and Edwards 2001:184-5).
Mooney and Edwards’s view, service learning includes each of the attributes featured within internships but also integrates structured reflection into the experience, with course content and community-based work ideally in dialogue. Finally, the category service-learning advocacy incorporates an explicit social change component, meaning that students serve as social justice agents, critical of the status quo and engaged in efforts to rectify injustices.

Mooney and Edwards suggest this typology is not intended to present categories as discrete types of programs but rather as a heuristic device. Its primary use here is as a foundation from which to explore the structure of our own program, which Mooney and Edwards would refer to as a “hybrid,” incorporating attributes from the service learning and service learning advocacy categories but also including features outside those frameworks (such as a collective engagement with communities and comparative analysis). Possibilities for Change incorporates many of the elements detailed in the service-learning literature, including: a service-learning component built into a broader classroom experience (Collier and Morgan 2002; Hollis 2002; Marullo 1998), a reading curriculum focused on social problems or social change, reflective writing in the form of journals (Collier and Morgan 2002; Everett 1998) and analytical papers (Hollis 2002), and partnerships with local community organizations and leaders. However, while a primary focus of our program is centered on social justice efforts, and students actively work with social movement organizations during their travels, we do not view the course as a straightforward advocacy experience. A key aspect to the program is its emphasis on comparative analysis, and to that end we seek to work with a wide range of organizations without assuming that any or all of the students are in total agreement with their tactics and goals. The fact that the pacing of the trip is such that we are never able to spend more than two days in a location also precludes the sort of attachment to sustained social justice campaigns that typically characterizes service-learning advocacy programs. In our view, these features are essential to CCC goals, but also present distinct challenges, which we take up in our discussion below.

Finally, the CCC framework described here provides students with ample opportunity to reflect on their experiences. The importance of reflection in service-learning programs is well documented as allowing students to integrate curricular materials and community-based experiences and to consider the causes and possible solutions for the social problems they encounter during the program (Everett 1998; Eyler 2002; Folse 2002; Hollis 2002; Marullo 1998; Mooney and Edwards 2001). Furthermore, the space for self-conscious reflection lets participants consider how the project has affected their own lives and their beliefs. In the literature, service-learning programs have incorporated reflection in three distinct ways. First, instructors can require that students keep a journal in which they record their experiences in the field along with their more personal reactions to working in community organizations and confronting their beliefs about institutions, social structure, individuals, and social change. Second, class meeting time can be used for collective reflection through group discussion of experiences and findings. Finally, and most generally, students, instructors, and even community members can be involved in a written evaluation process that allows each party to consider what did and did not work well within the program.

In its existing form, the CCC learning model provides opportunities for each form of reflection. The nature of an intensive travel experience ensures that there is ample free time for students to keep detailed journals of their experiences and to come together as a group for extended discussions. While instructors at times lead structured lessons designed to provide historical background or to introduce specific theoretical models, we also block out nightly sessions in which students engage in open discus-
sion. During these sessions, all are encouraged to connect their experiences to readings and theoretical material covered during the spring semester but also to share more personal feelings and reactions to each community and organization. After the trip, the fall semester class requires that students continue to keep a journal (with weekly, rather than daily, entries) focusing on how they are able to integrate class material with their experiences in various communities as they complete work on their individual projects, based on data gathered on the trip. At the end of the yearlong program, each student completes a detailed written evaluation focused on their reactions to various goals and experiences—both formal and personal—within the program itself. In the next section, we use these evaluations to examine the extent to which the CCC learning model is effective from a pedagogical standpoint.

OUTCOMES

Our stated goals for the Possibilities for Change program are to provide students with an experience that allows them to more deeply engage with the subject matter at hand—providing an experiential illustration of the ideas included within course readings—and to realize their own potential agency in affecting whatever instances of injustice they may confront. After the first version of the year-long course, we distributed a detailed evaluation form asking students to respond at length to a set of questions related to the expressed aims of the program, the connection between the travel component and course readings and topics, and the program’s overall impact on their perspectives and plans. From the set of responses, we are confident that the collective out-of-class model holds considerable potential as a teaching and learning experience.

The overall program was unanimously positively received by the students. Each of the 12 students pronounced the experience an unambiguous “success,” and several expressed that the program was, in the words of one student, “the most important event in my life up to date.” In this general sense, the act of traveling to interesting sites in itself enhances the experience, a finding supported by Brinkley (1993) in his account of a similarly structured bus program. The key, however, is whether the experience moves beyond an overall broadening of participants’ experience to meet our particular goals.

The most direct benefit of on-the-road learning, as we see it, is that it provides an opportunity for students to directly engage with course topics. Without exception, students felt that firsthand experience in a range of communities in itself expanded their perspective while also providing a way for them to more fully engage with readings and classroom discussions. The general benefit of the model was summarized by one student who, in response to a question about whether the program was a (self-defined) success, called it “amazing, the single best academic and perhaps social experience I’ve had [in college].” He went on to say:

I was able to see issues like gentrification, civil rights, and class inequalities live and how they affected people on a personal level. It was no longer textbook theory, but real! Let me try to put it into words: I’ve met Congresspeople in Washington, DC, and homeless people in Memphis; I’ve helped build a house [with Habitat for Humanity] in Baton Rouge and cook a group lunch [with Food Not Bombs] in Chapel Hill; I’ve seen my busmates at all hours of the day and night and carried on deep discussions about social issues and had a dance party with them on the bus too! Success? Success!

Beyond his obvious excitement, this passage is telling, making reference to the benefits resulting from 1) the range of experiences on the trip itself, 2) the connection of these experiences to more conventional classroom-type discussions of readings and ideas, and 3) the importance of the collective experience as a source of collaboration and reflection (and memorable fun). We evaluate students’ responses to each of these dimensions in turn.
First, the most evident focus of the student evaluations is on how the out-of-classroom experience itself provided a mechanism for learning. One student mentioned that “in itself, reading the material about these issues and places did not compare to actually being there and experiencing them firsthand.” Others responded similarly:

In my opinion, the “out-of-the-classroom” aspect of the program was essential and made this program unique. Whenever we study theory in any class, it can seem incredibly abstract. We saw where the real deals were going down; we saw people taking action. Without the bus excursion, there would be nothing new about this course. This trip allowed us to go out, experience in person what we had read, and inspire us to do something about what we saw.

The out of class component was essential to improving the learning done in class. It was so important to see these groups at work, to hear the people being affected and others, to see the scenery, to feel the place—for a full understanding there would have been no other way and that is undeniable. The trip forced us to break down stereotypes, struggle with ourselves, see good and bad in society, and it really opened my eyes to the potential of all people and the unique dynamics of communities and organizations.

Before this trip, I was unhappy with the monotony of all the college courses I had taken. I was frustrated with my major and with the classes I was signed up for. This trip changed everything. It has definitely renewed my faith in the educational system and in what I hope to pursue in the future.... Now, I am 100% more likely to attend events and lectures dealing with activism and community organizing.

Second, beyond owing the richness of the learning experience to our direct exposure to local people and communities, the ability to travel to various sites provided a complement to more general ideas presented in readings, lectures, and class discussion. The relationship between these components was symbiotic: the in-class material covered before the trip was essential as it provided a framework to interpret experiences on the road. In turn, the traveling portion of the program allowed students to more fully comprehend what they sometimes viewed as abstracted knowledge. More than one student reflected that the central theoretical connection in the class (the fact that political action is shaped by the structure of local community settings) was difficult to grasp until we could actually visit a range of communities, observe the structure of the local environments, and then meet and work with social movement organizations. Afterward, during group discussions, we could focus on how particular aspects of the community related to issues, framings, and mobilization strategies favored by the SMOs we had seen up close. A quarter of the students referred to material from class readings using the same phrase: it was “brought to life” by our travels. More specifically, another commented:

Not only did we learn about social movements and organizations in their historical context, we also got to experience them in their current state. By doing so we were able to better understand what is needed for social movements to occur. As far as seeing what intense racial segregation, poverty, homelessness, suburbia, and rural communities look like and feel like, we learned that too. The class and the trip gave me the analytical tools to understand what has worked and what has not worked in social organizing and how it is then possible to apply it to the women’s movement [the topic of the student’s individual project].

Third, consistent with the emphasis on reflection in the service learning literature, most participants clearly concurred with one student’s assertion that “interactions with peers and lessons learned from those on the trip were most valuable to the development of my own ideas.” Living together on the bus had a huge impact on how learning occurred. In a practical sense, the lack of separation between class and other activities meant that we had abundant opportunity for group discussion and reflection. The nature
of this interaction was also significantly affected by the intensity of our experiences, as both students and instructors became highly familiar with everyone's day-to-day living habits. The fact that we mutually needed to work out a system to clean the bus, pack our bags away in the small space allotted under the bus, and have everyone ready on time for each day's tasks meant that we continually made our own attempts at cooperative collective action. Each day was also a new experience for all, students and instructors alike, and the fact that our discussions were based upon our impressions and ideas about something that we had experienced together (rather than, say, a book that the instructors knew intimately but the students were confronting anew) contributed to an egalitarian atmosphere within which students felt empowered to contribute. The role of the instructors became less didactic and more facilitative, the goal being to provide tools for making broader connections and interpretations. The students frequently commented on how this environment affected them in a positive way:

Having the instructors constantly accessible [on the bus] made the whole project come together. I was able to meet with them individually and in the group setting to discuss my project and all of the other new things we were experiencing. I became closer to them personally but also gained more confidence in expressing my intellectual ideas and developing my thoughts through conversations with them. I think they had an important role in my learning in that we had probing discussions both on and off the bus and were given new perspectives from them. The instructors were able to synthesize the amazing things we were constantly exposed to on the trip and helped when issues got to be overwhelming.

In a sense, the instructors were like the "gateway" to all the other types of learning that occurred on the trip (i.e., observation, interaction, textbooks, learning from each other, etc.).

In sum, the unique combination of collectively sharing both classroom and field experience had a demonstrable far-reaching impact on students' sense of intellectual agency and general perspective on the core issues of the program. Several students commented that their experience on the bus has shaped both their subsequent work on campus and their long-term career plans:

I think the best evidence that the experience was successful was that now back on campus I have been able to apply the experiences and knowledge I gained from the bus to virtually all of my courses and have gained many new insights since that time. In addition, I have been able to really imagine effective ways to deal with social justice issues here and spread these insights to others.

I think my experience on the bus is something that I can take with me in anything that I decide to do. Being on the bus is really what solidified my decision to go into a life of public service.

The program has definitely influenced what I want to do in my life. Actually it has pushed me back in my original direction of working in non-profit and public management and policy.... The bus really made me focus on where my skills and experiences are needed in the community. Because of it, I have a clearer view on what it is I want to do with my life.

DISCUSSION

We have described a variation on existing service-learning programs, which we refer to as comparative collective community-based learning. The CCC learning model allows students to engage directly with off-campus communities, with emphasis on class members' collective participation in community activities. Additionally, to facilitate the understanding of sometimes abstract connections between community organization/structure and particular outcomes (in this case, the issues, organization, strategies, and tactics of SMOs), we make use of a comparative approach predicated on visiting a number of organizations in a wide range of communities. The intense
group travel component described here, while certainly not essential for CCC learning programs, provides a basis for added individual and group-level reflection opportunities while exposing students to a wide variety of organizing styles enacted within a range of community contexts. In the previous section, we showed that this model yields significant benefits in student learning. Here, we discuss two key issues in more depth: how our decision to privilege local contexts for SMO activity ties to a set of costs and benefits associated with our comparative approach and how the CCC model can productively be implemented within more conventional university and college programs.

Pros and Cons of a Comparative Local Approach to Community-Based Learning
Much attention is given today to supra-local and transnational ties that allow diffuse clusters of activists to organize around increasingly globalized issues (Eterovic and Smith 2001; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Karam, Riker, and Sikkink 2002; Tarrow 1998). However, the fact remains—despite the explosion of new communications technologies that break down spatially determined relations and heighten awareness of the national and international bases for local inequalities—that most activist issues and identities emerge from, and are sustained by, participants' orientation to a local community. To the extent that local community structures provide a context for the emergence of certain forms of activist activity (i.e., a set of opportunities and constraints within which individuals interact and develop grievances as well as a "tool-kit" of understandings and tactics that shape subsequent action), it is essential to gain an understanding of routine local life to comprehend contentious political activity initiated by pockets of residents. The emphasis on the local, we assert, holds even for issues that seem tied to national or global bodies making policy with seemingly negligible resulting local effect. For example, while analysts generally focus on how a multitude of heterogeneous groups were able to communicate and come together at recent anti-WTO protesters in Seattle and Quebec City, a key aspect of this phenomenon was that the masses of protestors were not composed of isolated individuals tied by Internet communication. Instead, they were overwhelmingly made up of collections of close-knit local groups and organizations, which only looked heterogeneous when viewed together at the events themselves (Finnegan 2000; Smith 2001). As geographer Byron Miller puts it:

[M]obilization occurs in a constellation of place-specific contexts. Although movement objectives and core messages may exhibit some national [or international] consistency, the reception of those messages is shaped by the constituent characteristics of place. As former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Tip O'Neill succinctly observed, "all politics is local." Even national politics must be anchored in particular places (2000:67).

The traveling component of the Possibilities for Change program allows for us to directly engage with these local dynamics, although an important tension arises within our framework: the benefits of exposing students to a wide range of communities to enable comparative evaluation and analysis versus the costs associated with emphasizing local processes and interactions without embedding ourselves in particular communities for extended periods of time. The transitory, comparative nature of the trip does effectively address the fact that many students have had extended exposure only to a small number of communities. Within that limited experience, generalizable occurrences within those communities tend to be perceived as given, a "natural" happening or, alternately, a product of the efforts of a few idiosyncratic individuals or circumstances. Spending short bursts of concentrated time in a wide range of communities—heterogeneous in size, ethnic and class makeup, climate, and region—makes the identification of key general characteristics
and processes considerably more evident and allows us to continually place a particular occurrence within a constellation of alternatives that we have mutually directly experienced during the trip. By the last two weeks of the trip, our aim is to have our group discussions include comparative insights that successfully link specific individual and organizational-level dynamics to general characteristics of the communities within which social movement organizations operate.

However, given the recognized benefits of conventional service-learning programs, many of which hinge upon students’ embeddedness in a single organization over time, there are significant costs associated with partnering with a range of groups for short periods. Not maintaining a relationship with a particular SMO means that students are not able to develop a full sense of the context within which particular tasks, strategies, and tactics play out. This limits their abilities to acquire the detailed knowledge and understandings that emerge both through extended exposure to group activities and from meaningful relationships with local activists. In the worst case, the experience becomes “voyeuristic,” lending itself to a superficial understanding of social problems and an inadequate exposure to organizations’ day-to-day connections to community members and institutions.

Through the organization of the CCC program, we seek to minimize these potential costs in two ways. First, the logistics of the program itself are designed to maximize our exposure to communities during our brief stays. Before the trip, we actively work to develop partnerships that allow for our students to be meaningfully, if only briefly, integrated into the activities of the SMO. In each case, our active participation in their work is supplemented by discussion sessions with movement organizers who introduce their positions on relevant issues, their orientation to the local community and larger publics, and the strategies and tactics through which they seek to advance their goals. Our work with each community organization also does not constitute the whole of our exposure to each community. As each student is also actively pursuing work on an individual project, much of our time is taken up with students speaking with (and often formally interviewing) community residents. From many students’ perspectives, perhaps the most rewarding aspect of the trip is the fact that they quickly develop a willingness to initiate conversations with community residents, an amazing number of whom are willing to share their thoughts and perspectives in considerable detail. Such direct contact with a range of community members provides a way to supplement our experience working with SMOs as well as to illustrate lessons about connections between the overall structure of communities and the workings of particular social justice organizations.

Second, instructors facilitate an understanding of how our limited experience can be placed within a broader context during reflective group discussion sessions, and students are always encouraged to use their experience with a range of groups to develop insights into the workings of each particular SMO. Before the trip, readings and classroom discussions are focused on political organizations’ orientation to local communities, and students closely study particular communities that they will visit on the trip. Of course, the fact that we value exposure to a wide range of social change approaches—from advocacy to direct service to community organizing—means that the extent and content of the connections between SMOs and their surrounding communities vary considerably. We thus treat such relationships as variables to be explored, and students become versed in “organizing” versus “mobilizing” traditions (Payne 1995) as well as how groups with service- or advocacy-based ends differ from organizing groups in their relations to community constituencies. In short, this strategy allows us to problematize the limitations of our experience. While students gain from their direct experience within communities, the fact that their connections
necessarily remain fairly superficial (given our time constraints and emphasis on a range of experiences) provides a framework for discussing how and why establishing deeper ties connects to the strategies and goals of our host organizations.

Also important is the impact that the students have on the community that they work within. Service-learning projects, especially those with an advocacy component, ideally have tangible effects tied to their social justice efforts. With only a day or two to work with each SMO, it is harder to envision developing meaningful interaction with community members or successfully helping the group achieve specific goals. However, the fact that we participate in SMO activities as a group means that we can often make a significant collective impact on a campaign or action in a short period of time. In certain cases, the product of our collective work with an organization is quite substantial, as when we cook and serve an entire “community meal” for a Food Not Bombs chapter or canvas an entire neighborhood to recruit participants for an upcoming anti-poverty demonstration organized by the Kensington Welfare Rights Union.

Yet even in these instances it is difficult to see our contribution as fully reciprocating the time, effort, and resources expended for us by our partners and hosts. It is important to acknowledge and work to rectify such inequities, though they do not, in our view, invalidate the broader benefits of this sort of program. We have already discussed how we seek to minimize these costs in the short term, and we feel that the primary community-based good associated with the program lies in the long-run benefits of our efforts. In several instances, our brief work with SMOs has provided a basis for the creation of an enduring relationship between students and the groups in question, with our one-time hosts benefiting from subsequent campus-based campaigns to provide help to their organizations. But perhaps the most important function of the trip is even longer-term, through its influence on students’ future career trajectories. As several students indicated in course evaluations, this intensive exposure to social change education and training is central to their decision to pursue future work with social justice organizations. Groups that partner with such programs are, in effect, making an investment in their own futures by imparting both knowledge and skills upon students who will potentially be able to “give back” through their own efforts after graduation. While such abstract benefits should not be used to explain away the fact that host organizations do expend significant resources to aid our efforts, their investment in the education of today’s students bodes well for the long-term development of effective activists.

Implementing the CCC Learning Model

In our experience, much of the benefit of the CCC learning model results from the intensity of the collective experience. While travel by sleeper bus allows us to efficiently visit nearly two dozen communities over the course of a month, it also serves as the setting for our own collective project. The fact that we literally live together within such a small space requires that we quickly learn to organize, negotiate, and cooperate to achieve our mutual goals. It also provides a space for intensive opportunities to collectively reflect upon our experiences, share our impressions, and integrate abstract theories with “real world” experience. However, the general advantages of the learning model presented here (adopting a comparative perspective to collectively engage with off-campus communities) can be achieved within a more conventional academic framework.

The central features of the Possibilities for Change program can each be adapted for inclusion within a local CCC learning program. While we choose to carry out our program in three parts over a full academic year, these components can be integrated to fit within a single semester. Course readings and discussions can take place alongside work with community organizations to
ensure that community-based activities are embedded within a larger curriculum (Everett 1998; Hollis 2002; Marullo 1998). We have found that the collective experience of working as a group in the community is invaluable, providing a base of common experience for later reflective discussions while creating a context for group cohesion, solidarity, and, ultimately, investment in the program itself. Such group efforts are logistically straightforward when working within a single local community, and the direct benefit to local organizations increases with less ephemeral student involvement.

We have also asserted that such collective experiences are more easily connected to general ideas about social action when placed within a comparative framework. While the traveling portion of the program facilitated our exposure to a range of SMOs within a variety of community contexts, similar goals can be met by working with a number of groups within a single community. In this case, the program can be organized to exploit the heterogeneity of a particular community setting by comparatively examining groups working on distinct issues and/or within distinct neighborhood settings. This strategy also lends itself to analyzing connections and divisions across sets of groups, which can link to more general ideas about social capital and coalition-building, topics not easily examined when spending only small amounts of time in a variety of communities. In short, while we encourage the incorporation of innovative forms of travel to broaden the social contexts that our students are exposed to within a curricular context, the Possibilities for Change framework described here is only one of many possible models for CCC learning. More generally, we advocate for a particular variation on conventional service-learning programs, one that uses a comparative, collective approach to maximize student engagement with, and understanding of, many topics at the core of the sociology discipline.

REFERENCES


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