

An Experiential Approach to Creating an Effective Community-University Partnership: The East St. Louis Action Research Project

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Abstract

Increasing numbers of American colleges and universities are undertaking long-term partnerships with community-based organizations and municipal government agencies committed to improving the quality of life in our Nation's poorest urban and rural communities. The most successful of these initiatives bring community leaders, municipal officials and university students together to develop innovative solutions to critical economic and social problems overcoming the significant race, class, and gender-based barriers that often make such cooperation difficult.

This article describes how community residents, municipal officials, and university students worked together to transcend these obstacles to create and sustain a highly-effective community development partnership that has improved living conditions in several distressed neighborhoods of East St. Louis. Participants in the East St. Louis Action Research Project described how they used David A. Kolb's experiential learning theories to recreate their partnership four times during a 10-year period to address unanticipated problems.

In 1987 State Representative Wyvetter H. Younge (D-East St. Louis) became the chairperson of the Illinois State Legislature's Joint Committee on Higher Education Finance. Soon after assuming this important legislative post, Representative Younge challenged Dr. Stanley O. Ikenberry, former president of the University of Illinois and current president of the American Council on Education, to demonstrate his administration's commitment to serving the State's urban poor. Dr. Ikenberry responded to this challenge by reallocating \$100,000 in campus funds to support East St. Louis research conducted by

university students and faculty. These resources enabled University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign's School of Architecture, in collaboration with the university's departments of landscape architecture and urban and regional planning, to create the Urban Extension and Minority Access Program (UEMAP). This initiative was launched to provide technical assistance to East St. Louis-based organizations engaged in community revitalization efforts; train neighborhood residents and municipal officials in basic community planning, design, and development techniques; offer undergraduate and graduate planning and design students hands-on urban research, planning, and development experience; and sponsor regional conferences highlighting innovative approaches to urban problemsolving (Reardon, 1995).

During the past 13 years, UEMAP has evolved into one of the Nation's most highly visible and widely respected community-university development partnerships. One of the major factors contributing to UEMAP's long-term success has been the willingness of its primary community and campus participants to repeatedly reframe their community planning approach to overcome unanticipated obstacles encountered in this severely distressed area. Drawing upon the experiential learning principles and methods developed by Dewey, Lewin, Whyte, Argyris, Schon, and Kolb, UEMAP's participants have viewed unexpected barriers to sustainable development as critical incidents requiring systematic reexamination of their core planning and design assumptions, goals, and methods (Dewey, 1948; Lewin, 1951; Whyte, 1984, 1991; Argyris, Putnam, and Smith, 1985; Schon, 1983; Kolb, 1984). UEMAP's social learning emphasis has led its participants to experiment with four different models of community planning during the past 13 years before adopting an empowerment planning approach emphasizing local organizational capacity building which they believe is optimally suited for professional practice in high-poverty communities. Project participants believe this bottom-up, bottom-sideways approach to community planning and design is highly effective in promoting sustainable development in high-poverty communities affected by extreme resource scarcity, high concentrations of political power, significant social distance separating neighborhood residents and local planners, and serious deterioration in the organizational effectiveness of local mediating institutions.

This article describes how UEMAP's community and campus participants have used David A. Kolb's experiential learning process to devise a highly effective approach to sustainable community development in this extremely poor urban community. Kolb's four-step process begins with the selection of an orienting theory that helps local actors identify community issues to be addressed, principles of good professional practice, alternative research methodologies, preferred intervention strategies, and recommended evaluative criteria. The second step in Kolb's experiential learning process features active intervention in the planning environment to achieve agreed-upon social outcomes based on the project participants' orienting theory. The third step requires participants to critically reflect on the consequences of their interventions to determine the extent to which their orienting theory has produced desired short-run outcomes. Contradictions emerging from the public testing of the orienting theory during active intervention in the planning environment are then used to modify these core ideas. During the fourth step in Kolb's experiential learning process participants are invited to test the adequacy of their modified orienting theory through ongoing experimentation. Participants in this structured social learning process acquire important new knowledge, skills, and capacities by engaging in an iterative process of theory building, social intervention, critical reflection, and active experimentation.

For more than a decade UEMAP participants have used Kolb's four-phase approach to experiential learning to guide their efforts to create a sustainable community-university

development partnership aimed at improving the quality of life in East St. Louis' poorest residential neighborhoods. The university faculty that established this ambitious community development project initially adopted the professional-expert model of community planning, which was the dominant approach to campus-based outreach in the late 1980s, as their first orienting theory. When this approach to professional practice failed to produce the level of citizen involvement, student engagement, and outside investment needed to stabilize the city's poorest neighborhood, UEMAP participants explored various ways to modify their community planning approach to address these problems. Ongoing disinvestment from their first target neighborhood prompted UEMAP participants to abandon the professional-expert approach in favor of a participatory action research approach to community problem-solving which was beginning to emerge as an increasingly popular social change strategy in very poor urban and rural communities in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres (Greenwood and Levin, 1998).

When this second orienting theory failed to generate sufficient economic and social capital to stabilize the project's first target neighborhood, participants sought to address this problem by integrating the principles, methods, and techniques of participatory action research and direct action organizing into a new community planning approach which they called empowerment planning. While this third orienting theory produced higher levels of citizen involvement in community building as well as greater amounts of public-private investment in the project's target neighborhoods, East St. Louis leaders criticized UEMAP for not providing leadership training programs needed to enable them to assume positions of relative equality with university-trained planners within the planning process. Such criticism prompted UEMAP's leaders to expand their original empowerment planning orienting theory, placing greater emphasis on the identification, recruitment, and training of new grassroots leaders. The project's empowerment planning concept was subsequently reformulated to integrate the principles, methods, and techniques of participatory action research, direct action organizing, and popular education as practiced by Myles Horton and Paulo Freire (1990) into a new social change paradigm.

The remainder of this article describes how UEMAP's community and campus leaders used Kolb's experiential learning process to develop a highly effective model of community planning practice that has led to significant new development in East St. Louis' poorest neighborhoods. The article reveals the nonlinear nature of UEMAP's evolution through four distinct phases. Major changes in project direction were adopted by UEMAP's leaders when critical reflection on practice, required by Kolb's approach to experiential learning, revealed fundamental weaknesses in the project's orienting theories.

The nonlinear course charted by UEMAP's community and campus leaders over the past 13 years to co-create a sustainable community-university development partnership is similar, in many ways, to that followed by a skilled crew of sailors constantly seeking the best lines during a competitive race. While the finish line never changes, the crew uses its accumulating knowledge of their craft, each other's skills, ocean currents, weather conditions, and their competitors to chart and rechart the quickest and surest route home. In community planning, skilled practitioners are constantly seeking the optimal way to promote local capacity building for sustainable development. While this overall goal never changes, the leaders and staff of effective community-based organizations use their deepening understanding of the principles of effective nonprofit management; the collective knowledge, skills, and capacities of their organization's members; the ever-changing local, regional, national, and international economy; the evolving economic and community development policy context, as well as the activities of cooperating and competing organizations to determine the most effective organizational development strategy to pursue at any given time.

The Professional-Expert Phase (1987–89)

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) had very few community contacts and institutional relationships in East St. Louis when it launched the UEMAP initiative in 1987. This situation, combined with the 188 miles separating the campus from the city, discouraged many university students and faculty from participating in the project. When none of the College of Fine and Applied Arts faculty with previous community development experience initially appeared willing to undertake this effort, Professors Carolyn Dry and Ernest Clay of the School of Architecture agreed to do so on an interim basis. From 1987–89 these two professors recruited 15 architecture, landscape architecture, and urban and regional planning faculty to participate in the project by selecting important physical, economic, and social problems confronting East St. Louis as their primary studio/workshop topics. During this period, students enrolled in these studios and workshops completed more than 50 planning and design studies, reports, and proposals examining critical planning, design, and policy problems confronting East St. Louis. Among the local issues examined by these UIUC students were: stormwater management, riverfront development, regional government cooperation, affordable housing construction, municipal park planning, local infrastructure maintenance, community economic development, and modular housing manufacturing (Dry, 1987, 1988, and 1989).

With few exceptions, these research topics were selected by UIUC faculty who possessed limited information regarding existing community conditions, resident preferences, and municipal priorities. Students participating in these studios and workshops pursued their East St. Louis research using the professional-expert model of professional practice which vested them with exclusive control over the selection of study topics, choice of research methodologies, development of survey instruments, collection of field data, analyses of research results, formulation of policy recommendations, creation of implementation plans, and establishment of program evaluation procedures. Resident involvement in these projects was largely limited to a review and comment role late in the planning process. Local, regional, and State officials, preoccupied with the city's deteriorating financial condition, paid little attention to these university reports, notwithstanding the quality of their analyses, recommendations, and implementation strategies. Only 1 of the 15 reports completed by UEMAP students during this time received sufficient local, regional, and State government support to be fully implemented. In 1989 the State of Illinois allocated \$900,000 in Build Illinois resources to finance the construction of a modular housing factory to create new jobs in East St. Louis. Unfortunately, weak housing demand, poor business management, and inadequate public oversight caused this promising local economic development initiative to fail.

UEMAP's persistent program implementation difficulties caused student and faculty interest in the project to plummet in 1989, prompting the university to search for a new faculty member with significant community development experience to coordinate the project. Upon joining UIUC's Department of Urban and Regional Planning faculty in summer 1990, I worked with the participating UEMAP faculty to complete a preliminary evaluation of the project. Interviews conducted with 45 neighborhood activists, professional planners, and municipal officials involved in local revitalization efforts revealed that few local residents and municipal leaders were aware of the university's East St. Louis research activities, and few were supportive of the concept of community-university development partnerships. The historic inability of campus-based researchers to solve the serious urban problems confronting East St. Louis during the War on Poverty, Model Cities, Planned Variations, and Community Development Block Grant eras, in spite of the large Federal grants many of these scholars received to do so, caused many city residents and municipal officials to view such individuals as little more than highly credentialed, self-serving carpetbaggers and ambulance chasers.

The preliminary survey of resident-official satisfaction with UEMAP that I carried out with the assistance of my graduate research assistant, Ishaq Shafiq, confirmed the need for a fundamental reorganization of the project. This need was further highlighted by leaders of the Emerson Park Development Corporation (EPDC), the only local community-based organization willing to consider ongoing involvement in UEMAP, which subsequently presented me with a detailed set of demands upon which they conditioned their future collaboration with the university. Among the demands I received from the group's long-time volunteer organizer, Ms. Ceola Davis, were community control of the university's East St. Louis research agenda, active resident participation in each step of the research and planning process, greater university commitment to program development and project implementation, and stronger university involvement in raising funds for local community revitalization programs.

The UEMAP faculty responded to the results of the resident-official survey and EPDC's formal input, which highlighted the project's ongoing implementation problems, by adopting a new community planning approach emphasizing neighborhood-based development through participatory action research. The participatory action research approach to community planning, which the project faculty adopted, sought to involve local residents and civic leaders on an equal basis with university-trained researchers at every step of the planning process from problem identification to project implementation to program evaluation. The faculty highlighted the project's new neighborhood emphasis and participatory research approach by changing UEMAP's name to the East St. Louis Action Research Project (ESLARP). EPDC's leaders reacted to this proposal by agreeing to work with university faculty, on a 6-month trial basis, to create a comprehensive neighborhood stabilization plan using these highly participatory and interactive methods.

The Participatory Action Research Phase (1990–91)

In fall 1990, 11 planning students and I began working with EPDC's leaders to formulate a comprehensive neighborhood stabilization plan for the Emerson Park area using participatory action research methods. This alternative social science paradigm had been simultaneously developed in the early 1970s by poor farmers working with university researchers in the Southern Hemisphere where various United Nations-, World Bank-, and IMF-sponsored agricultural technology transfer projects had failed, and by industrial workers and their managers who faced increasing employment insecurity due to declining productivity in the Northern Hemisphere (Greenwood and Levin, 1998). The planning process began when community residents were invited to join UIUC planning students and faculty in identifying local problems that were undermining the quality of life in the Emerson Park neighborhood. Community residents and university students and faculty worked together as co-investigators to devise the project's overall research design, create numerous survey instruments and interview schedules, and collect and summarize physical conditions and resident preference data.

The analysis of these data was significantly improved by participatory research techniques that integrated the residents' local knowledge of the city's social history, community dynamics, and urban problems with the researchers' disciplinary knowledge regarding contemporary social theory, research methods, and public policy. Great emphasis was given throughout this process to identify specific policies and programs that could be implemented, despite East St. Louis' serious resource limitations, to improve the quality of neighborhood life for current residents. University students and faculty accepted joint responsibility, along with EPDC's leaders, for securing the external funds needed to eliminate the neighborhood's most serious public health, substance abuse, crime prevention, housing deterioration, youth development, and community organization problems.

The Emerson Park planning process was launched when university planning students assisted EPDC's leaders in establishing a Sponsoring Committee representing the communities' major stakeholders, including church pastors, school principals, area businesspersons, social service professionals, block captains, and neighborhood activists. With the university's help, this Sponsoring Committee designed and executed an aggressive community media campaign aimed at mobilizing Emerson Park's 1,900 residents for active involvement in the planning process. Residents, businesspersons, and institutional representatives attending the Sponsoring Committee's first neighborhood planning meeting received detailed information regarding the area's changing population, work force, and housing conditions from the project's student planners.

Following the students' presentation, a young man from the neighborhood complimented the students on their efforts but asked why they had limited their comparison of Emerson Park's demographic and housing profiles to those of other East St. Louis neighborhoods, the city of East St. Louis, and St. Clair County. This young man argued that the most dramatic consequences of the St. Louis region's increasingly uneven development pattern were being unintentionally masked by the students' failure to compare the neighborhood's demographic and housing trends with those of the region's rapidly expanding suburban communities. He strongly encouraged the students to compare Emerson Park's demographic and housing trends with those of the region's suburban ring by subtracting East St. Louis' census figures from those of St. Clair County. The student planners' willingness to accept such criticism of their analysis of local conditions by revising more than 30 handmade population, employment, and housing tables to respond to this young resident's thoughtful, albeit embarrassing, critique of their work impressed many of those attending this initial planning meeting.

When the analyses of the neighborhood's basic population, employment, and housing trends had been completed, a small group of residents and students were trained by university faculty to complete a systematic land-use, building conditions, site conditions, and infrastructure maintenance survey of the 55 blocks comprising the Emerson Park study area. Two-person teams of neighborhood residents and university students collected physical condition data for the 1,407 building parcels and their adjacent streets that make up the study area. The presence of these racially integrated resident-student teams in this overwhelmingly African-American neighborhood generated considerable suspicion, curiosity, and excitement regarding the planning process among local residents. The project's field researchers were trained to encourage residents they encountered during the data collection process to attend upcoming neighborhood meetings to learn more about the project. During fall 1990, attendance at these monthly neighborhood meetings jumped from 15 to 125 as a result of various curbside recruitment efforts that took place during data collection.

When the data describing the neighborhood's existing physical conditions had been collected, analyzed, and discussed, community and campus volunteers were mobilized to interview representatives of the major social institutions serving the neighborhood. Resident-student teams were again organized to systematically elicit local institutional leaders' perceptions of Emerson Park's current condition and future community development potential. Following more than 40 mover-and-shaker interviews, the heads of more than 125 Emerson Park households were also interviewed regarding their perceptions of the neighborhood and its future. Responses from these institutional leader and community resident interviews were then analyzed by the Sponsoring Committee, with the assistance of the project's student planners, to identify common themes related to the area's current conditions and future development needs. Findings emerging from this analysis were then integrated by the Sponsoring Committee with those from the earlier analyses of census

data and physical condition surveys to develop a strategic understanding of Emerson Park's current neighborhood strengths and weaknesses as well as its future development opportunities and threats.

The preliminary assessment of the neighborhood's basic wellness, completed by the Sponsoring Committee with the assistance of ESLARP's student planners, revealed serious environmental, public safety, job generation, housing, employment, youth development, and community organization problems. This assessment, along with a preliminary set of neighborhood stabilization goals, community revitalization objectives, and area improvement projects formulated by the Sponsoring Committee with university assistance, was unanimously endorsed by more than 125 residents attending a neighborhood planning hearing held by EPDC in December 1990. These findings and recommendations were then incorporated into EPDC's Emerson Park Neighborhood Improvement Plan by ESLARP's student planners which subsequently received the 1991 American Institute of Certified Planners' "Best Student Project Award" (Adanri et al., 1991).

While the East St. Louis Housing Authority (ESLHA) and the U.S. Department of Justice's Metropolitan Enforcement Group of Southern Illinois (MEGSI) worked closely with EPDC to implement the housing stabilization and crime prevention proposals contained within its plan, the city of East St. Louis did little, if anything, to respond to the residents' neighborhood revitalization proposals. Reflecting upon the city's apparent unwillingness to implement major provisions of EPDC's Emerson Park Neighborhood Improvement Plan, Five-Year Community Development Block Grant Proposal, and Emerson Park Community Safety Plan as well as the municipal government's subsequent opposition to the Lansdowne Area Improvement Association's Lansdowne Neighborhood Improvement Plan and Lansdowne Five-Year Community Development Block Grant Proposal, ESLARP faculty, in conjunction with their Emerson Park and Lansdowne community partners, decided to adopt a new community planning approach in 1991 as they responded to a new request for technical assistance from the residents of the Winstanley/Industry Park neighborhood.

The Empowerment Planning Phase (1992–94)

ESLARP's inability to secure municipal government support for the major provisions of its Emerson Park and Lansdowne plans prompted participating faculty to explore alternative approaches to building a broad-based citizens' movement in support of grassroots planning. In fall 1991, four graduate planning students and I began working with leaders from the Winstanley/Industry Park area to devise a comprehensive stabilization plan for their neighborhood. We attempted to overcome the program implementation problems that had undermined ESLARP's Emerson Park and Lansdowne planning efforts by incorporating direct action organizing techniques, pioneered by the late Saul D. Alinsky (Alinsky, 1971), into the core of the participatory action research process.

While ESLARP students and faculty had previously invited established civic leaders to work with them in the creation of their Emerson Park and Lansdowne plans, UIUC students and faculty now attempted to use every research task as an important new opportunity to engage previously uninvolved residents in the neighborhood planning process. In this way, project participants sought to expand the political base of support for collaborative planning by integrating direct action organizing techniques such as ongoing community outreach, maximum resident decisionmaking, intensive leadership development, and nonviolent protest into the participatory action research process. ESLARP's community and campus participants described their new approach to community planning in the Winstanley/Industry Park neighborhood as empowerment planning. This approach was designed to increase the power residents, small business owners, and institutional leaders

from the city's poorest neighborhoods had over the investment decisions affecting the quality of life in their community by creating a broad-based citizens' movement in support of redistributive economic development policies and more participatory policymaking processes.

A neighborhood mapping exercise used by Kevin Lynch and a disposable camera activity inspired by Paulo Freire (1970, 1993) were incorporated into the beginning of the Winstanley/Industry Park neighborhood planning process to encourage previously uninvolved neighborhood residents to become involved. Residents attending Winstanley/Industry Park's first neighborhood planning meeting were asked to work together in small groups of five to seven persons to transform a set of blank base maps into illustrated condition maps highlighting their neighborhood's boundaries, recognizable subareas, historic landmarks, community assets, environmental threats, social problems, and untapped resources. Information gleaned from the maps generated by these small groups was then integrated into a single neighborhood conditions map depicting Winstanley/Industry Park's current strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. At the conclusion of this meeting, each resident was given an inexpensive disposable camera containing film with 27 exposures. Each resident was then asked to spend approximately 2 hours during the coming 2 weeks to capture nine images depicting their area's major strengths or assets, nine images revealing their community's major weaknesses or problems, and nine images illustrating their neighborhood's most significant underutilized resources. When they completed their picture-taking activity, residents were asked to return their cameras to the Mt. Sinai Missionary Baptist Church so their photographs could be developed for use at the next neighborhood meeting.

Residents attending Winstanley/Industry Park's second neighborhood planning meeting were again divided into small groups, given four shoe boxes labeled strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, and a stack of recently taken neighborhood photographs. Each group was then asked to caption its photos, place them in the appropriately marked shoe box, and organize the images within each box according to major themes. The neighborhood observations and analyses produced by these small groups were then discussed by all those attending the meeting and integrated into an overall assessment of current Winstanley/Industry Park conditions. Neighborhood residents, working with university planners, subsequently sought to verify the major findings emerging from the neighborhood mapping and disposable camera exercises using data from the census, physical conditions surveys, institutional, and household interviews that had been successfully used to create the recently completed Emerson Park and Lansdowne plans.

During the 1991–92 academic year, these and other participatory planning methods helped transform the 12-person Sponsoring Committee for a Winstanley/Industry Park Neighborhood Organization (WIPNO) into a legally incorporated community development corporation representing 75 dues-paying families. These families, assisted by four ESLARP planning students, worked together during this period to prepare the Winstanley/Industry Park Community Revitalization Strategy: 1991–96, which sought to implement housing and community development projects aimed at enhancing the quality of neighborhood life; strengthen the organizing, planning, and development capacity of WIPNO as a newly established Community Development Corporation (CDC); and increase the number of local residents actively involved in ongoing community-building activities. When city officials declined to assist WIPNO in transforming five trash-strewn vacant lots into a new toddlers' playground, its members took action. They organized resident delegations consisting of 10 to 15 WIPNO members to meet on an individual basis with key local and county officials responsible for the disposition of tax-delinquent property. They also mobilized residents to send postcards to each of their local elected

officials encouraging them to provide WIPNO with the land needed to construct the proposed playground. When local officials failed to respond to these tactics, WIPNO leaders recruited local residents to submit letters supporting the playground project to the *East St. Louis Monitor*, the city's most widely read newspaper. Finally, WIPNO's officers mobilized over 200 residents to attend more than a dozen meetings of the city's local taxing districts to lobby for the land needed for the playground. Over time, WIPNO's pressure tactics convinced the city of East St. Louis to provide the land needed to build their proposed children's playground to WIPNO without expense.

Between 1992 and 1994 ESLARP's empowerment planning approach significantly expanded the political base of support for resident-generated neighborhood stabilization and community development plans. Municipal officials reacted to the heightened level of citizen participation in the planning process by significantly increasing funding for improvement projects in the city's older residential neighborhoods. In the year following the completion of the Winstanley/Industry Park plan, city officials helped WIPNO secure \$60,000 to transform an abandoned used car lot into an attractive new farmers' market, \$175,000 to substantially rehabilitate seven single-family homes occupied by low-income elderly residents, and \$70,000 to provide credit counseling to low-income families interested in becoming homeowners. The overhead provided by these publicly funded projects enabled WIPNO to become the first East St. Louis-based development organization to have its own office and employ a full-time professional planner.

With this planner's assistance, WIPNO was able to complete a significant number of ambitious neighborhood improvement projects in 1994. WIPNO's expanding list of accomplishments, increasing levels of external funding, and growing regional reputation as a can-do organization with significant capacity prompted other East St. Louis neighborhoods to request technical assistance from the university. In 1995 two ESLARP planning students agreed to help residents of the Edgemont neighborhood, one of the city's only middle-class areas, develop a comprehensive stabilization plan following the fatal shooting of a neighborhood honors student by a suspected drug dealer. This plan was successfully formulated using the empowerment planning approach first employed in the development of the Winstanley/Industry Park neighborhood revitalization strategy. This approach produced an innovative plan focused on crime prevention, housing stabilization, commercial revitalization, and youth development that neighborhood residents and local officials enthusiastically supported.

The empowerment planning process also helped the Edgemont Citizens for Crime Prevention and Community Development (ECCPCD) expand its active membership base from 6 to 50. This new membership base subsequently enabled ECCPCD to successfully oppose a suburban builder's efforts to construct rental housing in the core of the neighborhood's established homeownership area. The organization's enlarged membership did not, however, enable it to prevent the construction of 60 townhouses by the East St. Louis Housing Authority in an area subject to recurring seasonal flooding. Over time, ECCPCD's advocacy efforts earned the organization the begrudging respect of the city's community development staff, which assisted the group in securing a \$66,000 grant from the United States Department of Agriculture's Urban Resources Partnership Program to hire unemployed youth to complete small-scale neighborhood beautification projects.

The success of the civic groups that followed ESLARP's empowerment planning model to secure significant community stabilization and revitalization resources generated additional requests for university assistance from the city's Olivette Park, Alta Sita, South End, and Goose Hill neighborhoods. The success of ESLARP's Winstanley/Industry Park, Edgemont, and Emerson Park planning efforts, in combination with growing student and

faculty interest in the project, prompted participating faculty to consider expanding their community outreach and urban research activities into these and other East St. Louis neighborhoods in 1995. Such expansion was made possible when ESLARP received a \$500,000 Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC) Grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Office of University Partnerships to provide community planning and design services to East St. Louis-based CDCs. As university planners pursued these expansion plans, a small group of ESLARP's oldest community partners came forward to share their serious reservations about the project's empowerment planning approach. While these leaders applauded the faculty's commitment to actively involve local leaders in each step of the planning process, they criticized ESLARP for failing to provide community residents with the kind of community development, participatory action research, and direct action research training that would enable them to collaborate, on a more equal footing, with university-trained professionals. This lack of training had, in the words of EPDC's longtime treasurer, Richard Suttles, reduced residents' role to that of the "small flealet, chasing the larger flea, hoping to land on the tail of the dog."

Initial faculty response to such resident criticism was somewhat defensive, and participating professors sought ways to minimize the implications of the residents' critique for their own project activities. Over time, however, the faculty came to appreciate the deep commitment to participatory planning methods that the residents' critique of our professional practice represented. Faculty came to view these criticisms of ESLARP as evidence of the extent to which their efforts to promote a bottom-up, bottom-sideways approach to neighborhood planning had succeeded, and they began to explore new ways to strengthen the project's leadership recruitment, training, and development activities.

The ESLARP faculty soon came to believe that the popular education theories and methods of Myles Horton, cofounder of the Highlander Education and Research Center, and Paulo Freire, the chief designer of several highly effective adult literacy programs in Latin America and Africa, could form the basis of a vigorous new civic education program for emerging grassroots leaders (McTaggart, 1997; Park, Brydon-Miller, Hall, and Jackson, 1993). In spring 1995 the ESLARP faculty redesigned the project once more to place both Horton's and Freire's ideas regarding education for critical consciousness at the center of the empowerment planning process. The incorporation of Horton's and Freire's educational concepts into ESLARP's empowerment planning approach transformed it from a two- to a three-dimensional social change model designed to amplify the voice of the poor within society through a combination of participatory action research, direct action organizing, and education for critical consciousness principles and methods.

The Organizational Capacity-Building Phase (1995–present)

ESLARP's faculty responded to residents' criticisms regarding the imbalance caused by the different levels of training provided to community residents and university students within the project in four concrete ways. In spring 1995 ESLARP offered the first in a series of free adult education courses for East St. Louis's civic leaders. Forty-three neighborhood activists, social service providers, and municipal officials completed the first 13-week seminar on community organization principles and practice requested by local leaders. This class provided local civic leaders with their first opportunity to share their future visions of the city, ideas regarding effective community-building methods, and insights about the region's most important development challenges with other grassroots activists. Participants in this class found this peer-exchange process so valuable they decided to form a citywide coalition of neighborhood organizations to continue their dialogue regarding ways to take collective action to influence the city's economic and community development policies.

Leaders of this new citywide coalition, called the East St. Louis Community Action Network (ESLCAN), subsequently asked ESLARP's faculty to assist them in designing an ongoing community development education program for East St. Louis's civic leaders. During the past 3 years, ESLARP faculty have cooperated with ESLCAN to provide free training programs for more than 300 local leaders through its East St. Louis Neighborhood College. Among the courses which the Neighborhood College has offered in response to residents' requests have been Fundamentals of State and Local Government, Environmental Racism and Justice, Community-Based Crime Prevention, Grassroots Fundraising and Development, Internet Resources for Community Development, and Nonprofit Management.

ESLARP augmented its support for the community-building efforts of its Neighborhood College participants in 1995 when it established the East St. Louis Neighborhood Technical Assistance Center (NTAC). This university facility is located in the heart of East St. Louis' central business district, and is jointly funded by the East St. Louis Community Development Block Grant Program, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The Center's professional staff, which includes a community organizer, a neighborhood planner, a nonprofit management specialist, and an architect, have provided free technical assistance to more than 40 neighborhood associations, social service agencies, and municipal departments involved in community stabilization and revitalization activities during the past 2 years. Recent actions by the East St. Louis Enterprise Community—which includes East St. Louis, its four adjacent suburbs, and St. Clair County—to provide NTAC with \$50,000 in supplemental funding to expand its efforts beyond the city's borders is a strong indicator of NTAC's effectiveness. Recent visits by municipal officials from the Champaign-Urbana area interested in establishing a similar community planning/design assistance center in their area offers additional proof of NTAC's contribution to local economic and community development.

ESLARP has also been involved in ambitious efforts to promote the use of advanced web-based computer technologies to facilitate resident-initiated community revitalization activities in East St. Louis. Since 1995 ESLARP has devoted a significant portion of its budget to create, maintain, and develop its East St. Louis Action Research Project Web site which currently contains more than 23,000 files of neighborhood planning, community development, and participatory design-related materials. Last month more than 70,000 hits were recorded at this site (<http://www.imlab.uiuc.edu/eslarp/>). Most ESLARP research, planning, and design projects are posted in real time at this Web site to permit campus and community researchers to share newly developed information, and to permit greater resident involvement in the data analysis and goal formulation phases of the planning process. Residents can access the ESLARP site Web site using university computers that faculty and staff have installed at three public access computer labs conveniently located throughout the community.

The NTAC staff have worked hard to encourage local residents, whose previous education and employment have not included computer training, to take advantage of these new resources by offering several Internet-oriented computer classes for East St. Louis youth and adults. Among the most active users of this computer network are a small group of elementary school children, known as Reverend Watson's Digital Disciples, who use these resources to assist each other with homework assignments. The ESLARP faculty and staff also have developed a user-friendly geographic information system (GIS) called the East St. Louis Geographic Information Retrieval System (EGRETS) that contains East St. Louis data gathered from more than a dozen public agencies. This program allows East St. Louis residents and officials to use icon-driven menus to access local statistics, maps, and images describing past and current conditions in East St. Louis. EGRETS

users with little or no previous GIS training can use this system to create their own thematic maps for planning analyses purposes. ESLARP faculty are currently working on two new Web-based services to further support resident-led planning initiatives.

The Environmental Rehearsal Lab is currently being developed to permit East St. Louis residents and officials to evaluate the implications of alternative planning and design decisions using virtual reality technologies. The Environmental Rehearsal Lab uses advanced computer imaging technology to enable resident leaders, municipal officials, and student planners to consider the physical effects of proposed policies on the city's built environment. The East St. Louis Policy Analysis Toolbox will offer residents, officials, and students the opportunity to explore a wide range of land-use, economic development, and municipal finance policy questions using various advanced analytical tools. These resources will be available on the Web and will feature an automatic report writing feature that will provide users with a jargon-free, plain-speak interpretation of their analytical output. A Web-based, input-output model developed last spring currently is being used by local residents and municipal officials to identify economic development projects that maximize job generation and tax benefits while minimizing municipal service demands and environmental damage. Local leaders recently used this system to develop preliminary plans for transit-oriented development along the city's newly constructed MetroLink corridor.

This past year ESLARP faculty took an additional step towards equalizing the power community residents and university staff exert within the project by inviting 50 community leaders, representing the project's major East St. Louis stakeholders, to participate in ESLARP's Annual Faculty Retreat. An outside facilitator, skilled in participatory evaluation methods, was hired to work with ESLARP's faculty in designing a 2-day program to assist the project's participants in evaluating the effectiveness of our ongoing organizational capacity-building and citizen empowerment efforts. ESLARP students and faculty spent the first day of the retreat analyzing the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats confronting the project as well as four different strategies for strengthening the project. Forty of ESLARP's most experienced community leaders spent the morning of the retreat's second day completing a similar strategic analysis of the project. A comparison of the student/faculty and community residents' evaluations of ESLARP was completed during the second half of the retreat's final day setting the stage for a spirited discussion of the project's future direction. The retreat ended with university students and faculty working together to identify 12 policy statements designed to improve the project and a proposed budget to achieve the organizational development goals produced by this collaborative process.

Strong resident interest in ESLARP's program evaluation prompted faculty to invite community representatives to continue to work with the outside facilitator to produce a publishable version of their evaluation as well as a residents' guide to evaluating other community-university development partnerships. This ESLARP evaluation and evaluative criteria was presented to the 140 community leaders and academics who attended the September 1998 COPC Grantees National Conference held in East St. Louis. ESLARP plans to publish these documents on its Web site once they have been fully edited. As a result of this program evaluation, discussions are currently underway among ESLARP's resident, student, and faculty participants regarding the optimal method for strengthening community residents' voice within the project's policymaking processes.

Conclusions

The severity of East St. Louis's environmental, economic, and social problems, along with Representative's Younger's influence on higher education issues, made ESLARP's

success an important university priority. These factors, in the context of growing public and legislative criticism of the lack of civic engagement by American colleges and universities, made the failure of UIUC's East St. Louis Project politically unacceptable. When the university's initial research and technical assistance efforts, based upon the professional-expert model of professional practice, proved to be ineffective, the faculty realized the need to pursue a more experimental approach. Kolb's experiential learning approach was then adopted to maximize the social learning produced by the project. This approach to learning, which was pioneered by Dewey, Lewin, Argyris, Whyte, Schon, and Kolb, emphasizes the nonlinear or iterative nature of social inquiry in which unexpected outcomes cause scholars to regularly reframe their research questions and reevaluate their methodologies. From an experiential learning perspective, systematic reflection on such critical incidents frequently serves as the precipitating event that promotes significant levels of new social learning.

In the East St. Louis case just described, four such critical incidents occurred that prompted participants to reevaluate their basic project approach. Increasing community and campus resistance to UEMAP emerged when its professional-expert model of community planning failed to generate significant community benefits, prompting participants to shift to a participatory action research approach. The city's refusal to support resident-initiated neighborhood improvement projects that emerged from this highly participatory planning approach encouraged participants to adopt an empowerment planning model that integrated direct action organizing and participatory action research principles and methods into a new social change paradigm. When the project's long-term community partners criticized this approach—despite its success in securing local government support for its major improvements—due to its inability to promote social learning for community residents, the participants devised a new approach to developing indigenous leadership based on the popular education principles and methods of Myles Horton and Paulo Freire (Horton and Freire, 1990).

The premium placed upon new social learning within the experientially based research approach adopted by ESLARP has enabled its participants to successfully adjust their professional practice approach to effectively respond to the changing requirements of East St. Louis' planning context. The dynamic nature of this planning environment necessitated the development of a highly flexible research approach like the one adopted by ESLARP's participants. Since 1995 the success of this approach has been highlighted by dramatic increases in the number of community-based organizations seeking ESLARP's assistance, the value of the ESLARP revitalization projects that have been implemented, the number of university faculty and student project participants, requests from nearby colleges and universities to join the project, the level of ESLARP's external funding, and the desire of Champaign-Urbana's civic leaders to replicate the project in their community.

The success of ESLARP's organizational capacity-building approach has also generated considerable national and international attention that has boosted its local development efforts and increased its visibility on campus and in the State. Two extremely favorable articles chronicling ESLARP's achievements, written by Neal Peirce, *The Washington Post's* Senior Urban Affairs Writer (Peirce, 1996), appeared in 77 of the nation's largest metropolitan newspapers in 1996 and 1997 enhancing the project's public profile. In the same year, ESLARP's Principal Investigator was invited to become an ongoing contributor to the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development's (UNRISD's) Voluntary Action and Local Democracy Project, which led to invitations to participate in the Non-Governmental Organization Forums of the Social Summit held in Copenhagen in 1996, the Habitat II Summit held in Istanbul in 1997, and the UNRISD Conference on Comparative Perspectives in Local Governance held in Shanghai in 1998. The

dissemination of the proceedings from these and other conferences in which ESLARP's Principal Investigator participated generated invitations to lecture at many of the U.S. colleges and universities considered leaders in the emerging field of community service learning.

Among the campuses where I have been asked to lecture during the past 3 years are: Cornell University, Stanford University, the University of California at Berkeley, Northwestern University, Vanderbilt University, the University of Maryland, the University of Kentucky, the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, the New School University for Social Research, and Arizona State University. ESLARP's leadership position among institutions involved in community service-learning programs was recognized by its selection as the site for HUD's 1998 National COPC Grantees Conference and the 1999 Illinois Campus Compact's Statewide Faculty Symposium on Community Service Learning, and the favorable treatment it received in HUD's new publication, *Building Higher Education-Community Development Corporation Partnerships* (Nye and Schramm, 1999).

Final Comments

Every planning environment presents urban researchers and planning professionals with unique opportunities and challenges that frequently necessitate innovative approaches to practice (Forester, 1999). The complex nature of the urban planning context frequently makes it difficult for scholars and practitioners, regardless of their experience and expertise, to initially select the most suitable planning approach. In those cases where researchers and professionals initially succeed in choosing the most appropriate planning approach, conditions often change, frequently as a result of the planners' actions, requiring a shift in the planning approach being taken.

The East St. Louis case highlights the difficulty of selecting the optimal planning approach as well as the challenges presented by changing environmental conditions. The case emphasizes the benefits of adopting an experiential learning approach to building sustainable community-university development partnerships. Such an approach enabled ESLARP's community leaders and university faculty to make steady progress toward integrating three previously isolated community intervention strategies into an effective new social science paradigm which they have come to believe is uniquely suited to overcoming the planning challenges of severely distressed communities such as East St. Louis.

This case is unique in that it chronicles the well-intentioned but ultimately counterproductive community intervention approach ESLARP participants initially pursued to promote positive change in this poor riverfront community. The case describes how these individuals extracted valuable lessons needed to devise an effective approach to planning in this distressed community by systematically reflecting upon their experience using principles of good practice for experiential education. This article should be useful to those who discover, as did ESLARP's community and campus participants, that intervention in complex social systems is rarely effective without considerable fine-tuning. This article is one of a small number in the planning literature that emphasizes the nonlinear nature of the research process in which critical reflection on early mistakes lays the foundation for important future social learning. While the biographies of many physical scientists, including Pasteur, Einstein, and Feynman, often reveal the nonlinear nature of the research process in which individuals learn from their early mistakes, such experimentation is infrequently discussed in the planning literature. To discuss this process would appear to violate the old political bromide that, "There are some things, such as sausage and legislation, that are just too painful and bloody to watch being made!"

Author

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