

Transforming Cities and Minds through the Scholarship of Engagement: Economy, Equity, and Environment

Lorlene Hoyt (ed.), Vanderbilt University Press, Nashville, TN, 2013, 262 pages

Heather MacDonald

Gateways: International Journal of Community Research and Engagement
Vol 6 (2013): 233–35
© UTSePress and the author

ISSN 1836-3393

Lorlene Hoyt addresses the difficult question of how the scholarship of engagement fits into, and is valued by, major research universities. Arguing that '[t]he thesis experiment is broken' (p. 213), Hoyt sets out to redesign the individualised and isolating experience of writing a research thesis into a collaborative process driven by peer critique and support. This book presents the results of Hoyt's experiment.

The book is framed around six chapters written by Master of Urban Planning students at MIT (assisted in three cases by co-authors), examining a linked set of themes: how are deindustrialised and distressed cities throughout the USA tackling the consequences of the Great Recession, and how are they dealing with the stimulus funding some received to address its consequences? The six chapters are organised into three pairs, addressing aspects of the economic, environmental and social equity foundations underpinning community redevelopment and revitalisation efforts. The research presented ranges from in-depth interviews with small business owners to comparisons of programs designed to upgrade home energy efficiency and create green jobs. In each case, the chapters conclude with recommendations for how revitalisation efforts could be improved. The six substantive chapters are bookended by Hoyt's description of and reflection on the collaborative learning approach.

The students who contributed to this book were each involved in MIT@Lawrence, a federally funded city-university partnership based on action research principles, set within CoLab (Community Innovators Lab) at MIT. The partnership involves service-learning through internships and projects, as well as the provision of technical assistance to community development projects, representing a good example of the relative sophistication of community engagement efforts in the United States. Federal funding has enabled a wide range of university-community outreach projects, aimed at breaking down the barriers between elite institutions and the often distressed communities in which they are located. This experience has resulted in a fairly rich

literature on action research and engaged learning in university-community partnerships, which would have provided a helpful context for the 'reinventing the thesis' project presented here.

The weakest chapters of the book are the introduction and conclusion, which return perhaps too often to Hoyt's dissatisfaction with not having been awarded tenure at MIT. Clearly, the lip service that universities give to the importance of a scholarship of engagement is not always reflected in the academic evaluation process, but the issue is not discussed in an even-handed way. Veiled insults of a new head of department who was 'conspicuously indifferent' (p. 210) to student and community project presentations do not help. Hoyt's discussion of the collaborative learning process does not offer an in-depth, structured discussion of the challenges faced and how these were (or were not) overcome. Instead, the introduction and conclusion are padded with personal profiles, transcribed conversations and overly detailed descriptions of events. Conflicts between participants, other academic staff and Hoyt are alluded to, but not explored. Consequently, the book avoids critical engagement with the difficult and important questions raised by student-centred learning and action research. How did the communities studied respond to the research process and its outcomes? How were the research projects designed to address community needs as well as thesis requirements? How was peer critique balanced with external critique?

The last of these deals with how gaps in the peer learning process can be addressed. In some chapters, arguments for a particular strategy are not balanced by any discussion of its potential limitations. For instance, while I was sympathetic to the arguments presented for a small-business-focused economic revitalisation strategy in Camden, the author does not address the substantial losses that most such efforts have incurred. The argument in the chapter (and its practical relevance) would have been strengthened if the downsides of the strategy had been discussed. Weaknesses in other chapters (such as lengthy digressions) also point to the limitations of relying on peer critique alone. Student-centred learning, particularly when students bring a wealth of real-life experience to the process, can be very effective. However, it needs to be supplemented with constructive criticism from academic supervisors. Reciprocal real-world-focused learning would be enhanced by feedback from community representatives. Hoyt points to the failure of the academic research supervision process for most Master's thesis students; but there is not much evidence here for how her own leadership of the collaborative thesis project provided a viable substitute for individual supervisors. Consequently, the book provides less guidance than it might for educators interested in exploring the links between community needs and the academic enterprise.

The lack of rigorous critical engagement may have resulted in the uneven quality of some of the research reported here. Chapters on Camden, Cleveland, Oakland and Lawrence

demonstrated sound research design that provided a credible basis for the recommendations with which they conclude. In particular, the lessons drawn from the Spanish economic cooperative, Mondragon, are applied very effectively to assessing Cleveland's local economic potential. The comparison between weatherisation programs in Oakland, Portland and Seattle forms the basis for meaningful recommendations to refine Oakland's program. Other chapters had less substance, and thus resulted in overly generalised recommendations.

The book would also have benefited from an introductory chapter that outlined the scale of problems faced in the case-study cities: how they fit into a regional economic context, and the nature of the stimulus spending that sought to transform economies, environment and equity. This would have eliminated some of the repetition among chapters, and could have framed each evaluation more consistently. The conclusion would also have been improved by more reflection on the commonalities in lessons learned in each of the studies, presumably one of the aims of collaborative research around overlapping themes.

Overall, the book offers an interesting set of case studies on how distressed US cities are responding to economic decline and the role federal stimulus funds have played in those responses; but its contribution to our understanding of the scholarship of engagement is less satisfactory.