Spatializing Community-Based Learning: How a Critical Geography Framework Can Foster Understandings of Structural Inequality and Egalitarian Relationships

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ABSTRACT

Critical service learning is an approach that works toward social transformation and egalitarian partnerships. However, the ways in which space facilitates or undermines this approach has been largely unexplored. Drawing on a case study from an urban education course, we argue that a critical geography framework can develop students' understandings of structural inequalities and nurture egalitarian relationships between partners.

Keywords: critical geography, space, service learning, community-based learning, social change, egalitarian relationship

Introduction

Since the 1990s, service learning has gained popularity in colleges and universities across the country because it is seen as a pedagogical tool that deepens students' knowledge and prepares them for the "real world," all the while "doing good." (Jacoby, 2003). However, critics argue that service learning can do more harm than good when college students swoop into communities to offer "solutions" to problems they know very little about (Cranton, 2011; Hickel, 2013; Urciuoli, 2013), and when they do so with patronizing attitudes (Pompa, 2002). In contrast, *critical service learning* is an approach that works toward social transformation rather than "doing good" (Mitchell, 2008).

To orient college students toward social transformation, critical service learning emphasizes: 1) teaching students about the

structural roots of social problems; and 2) nurturing egalitarian relationships with community partners. Some institutions and faculty may be earnest to implement critical service learning, but are uncertain of how to structure a course that teaches students about structural inequalities and encourages students to form reciprocal relationships with community partners. This case study draws upon our experiences in an urban education course at Swarthmore College—namely, the perspective of the professor designing the course (Roseann Liu), students who took the course (Sarah Fischmann and Ashley Hong), and a teacher from the community partner site (Kathleen Melville)—to provide insight into how space, as an analytic tool, facilitates students' understanding of the root causes of urban educational inequalities and mitigates power differentials with community partners.

A note about terminology: we will mainly use the term *community-based learning (CBL)* to describe the activities that Swarthmore students participated in. However, we will continue to use the term *critical service learning* when referring to a specific body of literature. We do this for two reasons: first, we wish to be consistent with how CBL is the preferred term used at our institution; and second, by privileging the term *community-based learning*, we hope to signal our privileging of practices that rely on notions of community and solidarity rather than service, which presupposes uneven power dynamics (i.e., privileged college students who are in positions to serve, and marginalized people who need to be served) (Taylor, 2002; Varlotta, 1997). Moreover, as we discuss how space can be a useful analytic for raising students' awareness of structural inequalities and for reflecting on their subject location in relation to others, the term *community-based learning*, with its connotations of space and people, is a better fit for accomplishing our goal in this paper.

Theorizing Space in Critical Service Learning — Using a Critical Geography Framework

This section aims to show how the literature on critical service learning can benefit from a critical geography framework. The literature on critical service learning has laid out useful guidelines, two of which include: 1) the need to focus on social change; and 2) to redistribute power in university-community relationships (Mitchell, 2008). First, critical service learning encourages a social change perspective that views problems as the result of unjust systems, rather than the misfortunes or actions of individuals. Central to creating a social change perspective among students is helping them develop structural understandings of social problems. While traditional service learning apoliticizes social problems (Hickel, 2013; Walker, 2000), the social change perspective combats superficial understandings, such as a student concluding that "poverty is no one's fault" (Hickel, 2013, p. 28). The social change perspective also asks students to problematize the idea of service by reflecting on why service is necessary in the first place (O'Grady, 2000; Rhoads, 1998). But understanding spatial theory is key to helping students gain a sense of the broader political, economic, and social contexts over time (Clark & Young, 2005, p. 74).

Spatial theories emerging from critical geography assert that under capitalist systems, space is a site of contestation among differently raced, classed, and gendered groups (Lipsitz, 2007). These contests are "essentially over who will live in the city, who will benefit from its growth and development, and who will get to participate in the fundamental decisions affecting economic and social life" (Lipman & Haines, 2007, p. 495). From the perspective of critical geographers, space is neither neutral nor unbiased; rather, it

is the manifestation of policies and practices that seek to reassert the power of dominant groups and dominant values. For example, as Lipsitz (2007) maintains:

> The plantation, the prison, sharecropper's cabin, and the ghetto have been visible and obvious manifestations of white supremacist uses of space. Perhaps less visible and obvious, but no less racist, have been the spaces that have produced unfair gains and unjust enrichments for whites: the segregated neighborhood and the segregated school. (p. 17)

Theorizing spatial arrangements within the context of Roseann's urban education course helped students see how physical spaces are used to subjugate and reproduce inequalities, thus creating unequal educational conditions (Ares, Buendía, & Helfenbein, 2017). Professors can guide students to ask tough questions concerning how space produces inequalities and to be reflexive about their presence in such spaces. These questions may include, "by what social processes is space constructed? How does place shape/produce power in service-learning?" (Clark & Young, 2005, p. 76). By theorizing space in community-based learning opportunities, professors are able to provide concrete examples of *structural inequality*—a concept that may seem abstract to undergraduates at first blush. Faculty can teach about how real estate policies and practices that actively manipulate urban spaces in favor of the White middle- and upper-classes, such as redlining, blockbusting, and white flight, create patterns of residential and school segregation that persist today. This prevents students from coming to the erroneous conclusion that segregation is "no one's fault." Instead, they come to understand that the "contours of racial inequality today flow directly from the racial and spatial heritage bequeathed to us from the past" (Lipsitz, 2007, p. 17).

Focusing on space can also aid in redistributing power in community partnerships—the second guideline laid out in the critical service-learning literature. The emphasis on redistributing power comes from Pompa's (2002) observation that university-community partnerships often traffic in paternalistic attitudes. Redistributing power not only requires a conscious reflection of one's social position, but also the recognition that marginalized groups are already recreating spaces to survive and thrive. Referring to segregated neighborhoods and schools, Lipsitz (2007) writes:

> For black people in the United States, struggles against the oppressions of race have by necessity also been struggles over space. African-American battles for resources, rights, and recognition have not only taken place, in the figurative term that historians use to describe how events happen, but they have also required blacks literally to take places. (p. 17)

Acknowledging how people of color actively "take places" and assert a "right to the city" (Harvey, 2003; Lefebvre, 1991) helps college students with unearned privilege (Mitchell, 2008) recognize the creative strategies that marginalized communities must employ to fight against unjust structural conditions. In segregated cities, white spatial imaginaries produce high rates of exchange-value and capital accumulation while excluding working-class communities of color from those financial benefits (Lipsitz, 2007). In contexts such as these, communities of color optimize the use-value of their neighborhoods by turning "segregation into congregation" (Lewis, 1991, pp. 91-92), thereby forming

solidarities against white spatial imaginaries. Redistributing power in university-community partnerships not only requires an interrogation of one's own subject position, but also recognition of the work that communities of color are already engaged in. Utilizing a spatial analysis allows college students to have greater awareness of instances of creative agency in contexts of political economic precarity.

Reflecting on the way space is unequally distributed, the populations that benefit from urban policies, and the actions that marginalized communities take to challenge these injustices is necessary in university-community partnerships. Service learning has become more popular on college campuses in the last decade (Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011). With this, universities have an ethical obligation to think beyond the value that service learning brings to building a student's resume. Applying a critical geography framework to the theory and practice of critical service learning can aid in accomplishing the goals of fostering social change orientations and more equal power relations.

Teaching and Learning About Spatial Inequality

In the spring of 2018, Roseann taught the *Urban Education* course at Swarthmore College, a small liberal arts college in Pennsylvania. Swarthmore serves about 1,500 students, 42% of whom identify as White, 17% Asian, 13% Latinx, 8% Multiracial, 6% African American, and less than 1% Indigenous. Three percent chose not to identify their race/ethnicity, and 11% are international students. Swarthmore's endowment recently exceeded $2 billion.

As part of the course, students participated in sites across Philadelphia—a city that is about 10 miles away and that is often derided as the poorest big city in America (The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2018). The city's racial demographics are: 45% White; 44% Black; 7% Asian; and 14% Latinx (White and non-White). The Workshop School, where Swarthmore students participated during the semester, has about 230 students, 91% of whom identify as Black and 87% of whom qualify for free or reduced lunch. Staff is about 50% people of color, which makes it less White than the School District of Philadelphia as a whole and more White than the student population. Given the racial and economic asymmetries between Swarthmore and Workshop students, the Urban Education course focused on interrupting denigrative assumptions about schools that serve poor students of color by presenting Swarthmore students with an explanation of structural inequalities and how these create the contexts they were about to enter into.

Critical geography is a term that is introduced to Swarthmore students early on in the semester and used to teach about structural inequality. The term is broken down into their constituent parts: *geography* is the study of land use and resources; *critical* refers to an orientation toward social justice and understanding inequality. Put together, *critical geography* refers to an examination of how space, land, and resources are manipulated and exploited to produce inequalities. Using the lens of critical geography, students explore themes of racial segregation and gentrification. Because these themes help explain the history and contemporary experiences of so many neighborhoods in Philadelphia, including where The Workshop School is located in West Philadelphia, we spend the first three weeks talking about these issues in preparation for students' school visits.

One of the texts used to discuss racial segregation is an article by Douglas Massey (1990), "American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass." The article is a difficult read for undergraduates, but it

usefully shows how the economic outcome of a neighborhood changes depending on how space is manipulated—that is, the more segregated the city, the more concentrated poverty experienced by a predominantly Black neighborhood. Massey does this by creating a series of simulated cities based on actual demographic data (e.g., race and poverty levels) of urban residents. We go through the article together in class, beginning with identifying Massey's (1990) main argument: "racial segregation is crucial to explaining the emergence of the urban underclass during the 1970s" (p. 329).

Next, we look at Massey's figures to understand how he came to his conclusion. Figure 1 includes Roseann's annotations of four aspects she points out in class to scaffold student learning.

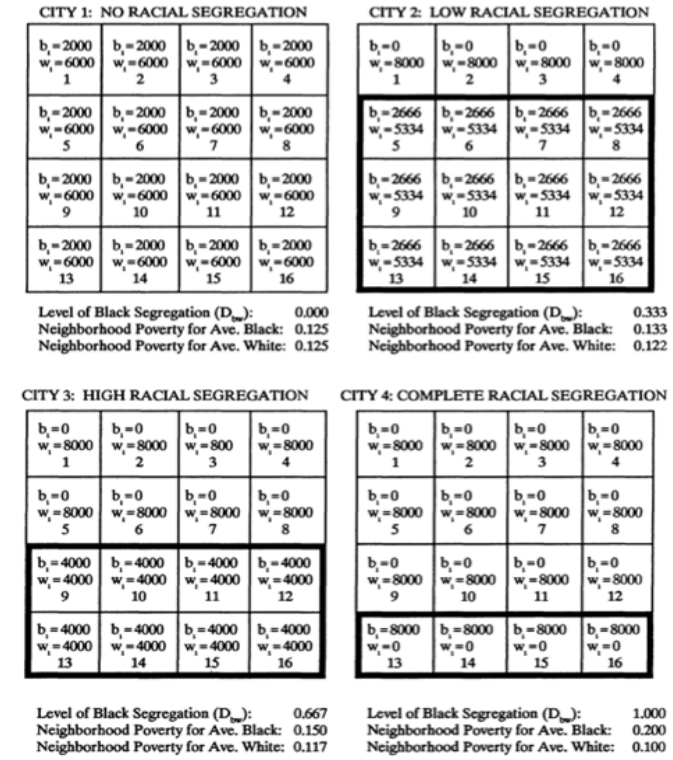

FIG. 1.—Effect of poverty segregation on poverty concentration in three hypothetical cities containing 16 neighborhoods, 32,000 blacks, and 96,000 whites with respective poverty rates of 20% and 10%.

1. Each of the four larger boxes represent the different levels of segregation that exist in that simulated city, from "CITY 1: NO RACIAL SEGREGATION" to "CITY 4: COMPLETE RACIAL SEGREGATION."
2. Each of the 16 smaller boxes within the larger box represent different neighborhoods and the population of Black and White residents in each neighborhood.
3. The thick band around a cluster of neighborhoods represents neighborhoods that include black residents, and indexes the degree of segregation that exists.
4. Based on these models, there is a significant difference between the "Neighborhood Poverty for Ave. Black: 0.125" in a non-segregated city (City 1), versus the "Neighborhood Poverty for Ave. Black: 0.200" in a completely segregated city (City 4).

Once students understand Massey's figures, we discuss how "the concentration of poverty in neighborhoods inevitably concentrates deprivation in schools" (Massey, 1990, p. 350). We talk about the fact that school funding mainly comes from local revenue sources and how concentrated poverty, as a result of housing segregation, "undercuts financial support for public schools serving poor blacks" (Massey, 1990, p. 350). Through this exercise, students begin to understand how space is manipulated by those in power to create racially segregated cities and the devastating economic and educational effects this has on communities of color.

Understanding the spatial story of communities like West Philadelphia and The Workshop School are incomplete without a conversation about gentrification. To help students understand the contemporary effects of gentrification—another form of spatial exploitation that low-income communities of color are particularly vulnerable to—we read *Marketing Schools, Marketing Cities* by Maia Cucchiara (2013). This ethnography is a favorite among undergraduates. In well-written prose, Cucchiara convincingly challenges the myth that bringing middle-class students to urban schools improves urban school systems. Instead, she shows how middle- and professional-class parents are treated as "valued customers;" how they gain spots for their children in high-quality city public schools; how this pushes out working-class students who live outside the school's catchment; and ultimately, how this reinscribes exclusive geographies. These dynamics are then connected to what is happening in West Philadelphia, specifically around gentrifying areas near The Workshop School, including the repurposing of the old West Philadelphia High building as luxury apartments. In a testimony before Philadelphia's City Council, Kathleen Melville, co-author of this article and teacher at The Workshop School, remarked (Philadelphia Public School Notebook, accessed July 2019):

> [O]ur children see what we value by the money we spend...When my students walk to school in West Philadelphia, they see that the old West Philadelphia High School is being transformed into luxury apartments. They see the fresh paint, the young trees, the new windows, the clean sidewalks. And when they arrive to school just down the street, they see the stark difference. Leaky ceilings, broken plumbing, and flaking paint.

For Sarah, one of the students in the *Urban Education* course who was placed at The Workshop School, she began to see how "valued" professional-class residents are carving out exclusive geographies. Introducing Sarah to a critical geography perspective allowed her to better understand the processes that have led to the condition of "leaky ceilings, broken plumbing, and flaking paint" in one corner of West Philadelphia, and well-manicured luxury apartments in a different corner. Through a spatial framework, she developed a more sophisticated structural understanding of the challenges that urban schools face.

The Workshop School: Designing Student-Centered Spaces

The Workshop School is designed to allow for strong relationships at several levels: student-to-student relationships, student-to-staff relationships, and staff-to-staff relationships. Students spend several hours a day in advisory in order to facilitate community-building throughout the school year. Every Wednesday, staff spend two hours together in professional development that is designed and

led by other staff members. The guiding principle of the school is "Community First."

The surrounding community as well as the school space facilitates "Community First." While admission to the Workshop School is open to students citywide, most students come from neighboring K–8 schools in West Philadelphia. Students get to school primarily by walking or taking the bus. About half of the staff members also live in West Philadelphia and arrive to school by walking or biking. The concentration of staff and students who live in West Philadelphia generates a sense of investment in the school and community.

The Workshop School was founded in 2013, in a space that originally housed the vocational automotive program of West Philadelphia High School. The school features two automotive garages and a maker space on the first floor, as well as more traditional classrooms on the second floor. During the school year, all parts of the building are constantly used. There are no unused classrooms or offices. When visitors come to the school, the only place for them to meet and talk with students is the cafeteria. The school does not have an auditorium or a gym. In other words, space is at a premium.

Nevertheless, the school community has a history of making the space their own. At the entrance to the school, car parts and workshop tools are welded to the wall surrounding the door. It makes clear that this is a "work in progress," a continual workshop for the world we are making. The sidewalk outside the door is covered in the colors and shapes of projects that have been spray-painted, most prominently, the outline of the numbers 5300, which identifies a nearby block where a student lives. On the street outside the building are a student-designed food truck, a student-made "kinetic sculpture," and an old shipping container that houses bikes under repair by students. On temperate days, the doors to the garages are open and students are on the sidewalks, working on or washing cars that partners have brought in to be repaired.

Inside the building, the space has similar signs of student ownership. Over the past five years, several advisories have taken on the "Classroom Redesign" project. Students design changes to their space—from painting murals to building furniture, from changing the seating and lighting to adding plants and photos. As part of the "Gateway" projects that students undertake at the end of 10th grade, students are tasked with redesigning either the cafeteria or the vacant lot next door to meet the needs of the school community. As students develop their ideas, the question often surfaces, "Why don't we buy the lot next door?" The answer is simple. The principal inquired about buying the lot, but the owners are holding out for a wealthy developer (like the one who bought the old West Philadelphia High School and converted it into luxury apartments) to offer them at least $5 million. Both exterior and interior usages of space are declarations of Workshop students' claim to the neighborhood; it is their way of making "segregation into congregation" (Lewis, 1991, pp. 91-92), and their vision of a future that is not dominated by luxury apartment buildings but rather an educational space in which students practice ownership.

Students' relationship to the space is visible in the way they give tours of the building. Visitors arrive in the building several times a week, either to partner with teachers on projects or to learn about school. When visitors arrive at the school, the principal does not show them around—the students do. During one occasion, Kathleen observed the principal ask a 10th grader, Janae, to guide the visitors through the building and tell them why it is special. Janae skillfully led the visitors through the building, intermittently stopping into classrooms to chat with students and teachers. In some classrooms, students were engaged in discussing community values, community-building activities, or refining

norms. Students enjoy giving tours, and giving one's first tour is often seen as a rite of passage for ninth graders. Giving a tour is an opportunity for students to take pride in a space that is unique and uniquely theirs. Adults in the building do not reserve this responsibility for students with high grades or stellar behavior. In fact, quite the opposite. The principal will often select struggling students for the privilege, as a way to invite them to take pride in the school and invest in the community.

Although the school is crowded, the constant prospect of "redesign" makes it a malleable space, always transforming to suit the community's needs. Every summer, at least one building project is underway, usually with students involved. Classrooms have been split in half, then restored to full size. Students have repaired walls that have suffered accidental holes. As part of a 10th grade project several years ago, students trained as peer mediators, then built a small peer mediation room in the corner of their classroom. Students built a recording studio on the second floor, then built another one on the ground floor when the Special Ed teacher needed the first one for an office. When it was damaged by rain, they repaired it. This summer, two more offices are being carved out of the largest classroom in the school to make way for an assistant principal, social worker, and college counselor.

As part of the district's Innovation Network, the school's project-based model attracts a number of visitors. Students are accustomed to interacting with adults who are new to the space. One piece of advice that students offer to new ninth graders is, "We get a lot of visitors here, so you should get used to it." For several years, one staff member of the school helped facilitate a writing center, a program to further develop Workshop students' academic writing skills, staffed by student volunteers from the University of Pennsylvania and Swarthmore College. Some of the Workshop students have developed relationships with the college students and look forward to the one-on-one attention their visits provide. Because the space belongs to Workshop students, the engagement between them and visiting college students tends to be more equal than it would otherwise.

Spatial Agency and Nurturing Egalitarian Relationships

In the spring of 2018, Sarah spent time with Workshop students in their writing center as part of the *Urban Education* course. Over the course of 10 weeks, she spent two hours a week there. During her placement, Sarah worked mostly with 10th grade students on a variety of cross-subject projects evaluated by teachers and outside guests. She worked with students on a wide variety of writing assignments, from brainstorming to revising and editing.

Sarah's first impression was of how the school imagines and uses space in a radical way. In the main office, she noticed that students comfortably streamed in and out to grab items off the printer, borrow a camera from the principal's office, or just say hello to administrators. The cafeteria, the only communal space in the school, was constantly brimming with mostly unsupervised activity as students set up green screens for their videos or practiced a scene for a play. In classrooms, tables were always set up in U shapes, and students were often allowed to sit comfortably either on top of them or in a seat. When teachers spoke, they often sat in the U and when students spoke, they often moved to the front of the classroom. Sarah was struck by how movement was comfortable, trusting, and respectful. Workshop students note this as well, as one student wrote in a school assignment, "This school believes in community building, which is why we set up classrooms in a way that involve the whole class, and it's also why we have Circle and Advisory every morning." The Workshop

School's use of space—open and usable by all—is in stark contrast to the many ways in which school spaces are used to discipline, control, and oppress (Ferguson, 2000).

During Sarah's first visit to The Workshop School, a student served as a guide and showed her the music studio, a small room in the lower floor of the school with a keyboard and some sound and recording equipment. He proudly explained how students were in charge of the design and creation of the music studio. It was clear that he had a strong sense of ownership over the space. The fact that the students felt ownership over their space deeply affected Sarah's interactions with students. This was especially evident in the case of her interactions with Amy.

Amy was brainstorming for a paper she would have to write in the future. Sarah sat down at the table next to Amy after being paired with her by a teacher. Without prompting, Amy immediately started explaining what she was working on, taking time to explain the basics of The Workshop School. These basics included a description of how the school day is organized, how school assignments are evaluated, and a description of a large-scale project that all students complete at the end of their sophomore year. Amy led the conversation. When Sarah asked a simple question, Amy would often give an extensive answer that included opening up other documents on her laptop to show Sarah her work. After many minutes of discussion, they began their work together. They would read over a question in the organizer, discuss an answer, and Amy would write down a couple of sentences based on their discussion. She would pause often so Sarah could read what she was writing. The meeting ended when the teacher announced to the class that they would be moving on to a different assignment.

There was an inevitable power imbalance between Sarah and Amy. Sarah was entering the school space as an upper-class White woman from an elite liberal arts school—an unearned privilege that could have resulted in Amy's deference to her viewpoints. While this imbalance existed, the control that Amy had over her space allowed her to exercise agency and take the lead in her interactions with Sarah. Exhibited in this example, students would often explain things without prompting and go into detailed descriptions of their work. Amy would often talk far more than Sarah, excitedly sharing what they had written about so far and their plans for future work. The sense of control that students had over the physical space of The Workshop School allowed for this power imbalance to be reduced. Because Sarah was a guest in a space where students exercised creative agency, students rightly assumed that she did not hold all of the knowledge about the school or their assignments. This pattern was sustained when they continued to establish that they held knowledge about how to complete their assignments in ways that Sarah did not. The school cultivated a culture of agency among its students—never did a student ask Sarah to come up with an idea *for* them or defer to her judgment. Because Sarah was at the Workshop school, a space specifically designed to facilitate its students' agency, Amy felt she could (rightly) establish herself as knowledge holder. This helped counterbalance the ways in which Sarah's background as a privileged White woman coming from an elite college could have potentially reinforced problematic dichotomies of who holds knowledge and power in university-community partnerships.

Discussion

Based on this case study, we found that incorporating a critical geographic perspective into coursework and fieldwork helps to: 1) develop college students' structural understandings of urban school inequalities; and 2) facilitate egalitarian university-community partnerships. Since this directly maps onto two of the three elements most commonly cited in the critical service-learning literature—i.e., cultivating a social change orientation and working to redistribute power between universities and communities (Mitchell, 2008)—this case study offers an important window into how a critical geographic framework can advance critical service learning.

First, exposure to readings about racial segregation and gentrification in cities helps college students gain a fuller understanding of how space is manipulated by those in power to maintain structures of inequality. Rather than believing that the rundown facilities at The Workshop School and its racially segregated student body is "no one's fault," Sarah developed a structural understanding of urban educational inequalities. This allowed her to contextualize the school's conditions within an urban history of race-based spatial disenfranchisement and gentrification. Sarah understood that the school's facilities and racially isolated student population were mere symptoms of broader interrelated problems of housing segregation, racially biased school funding, and changing urban economies that led to high rates of unemployment. By better understanding the root (i.e., structural) causes of social problems, college students can adopt a social change orientation to community-based learning.

Second, by gaining a heightened sensitivity to the relationship between space and power, Sarah and Amy were able to engage on equal footing. Having college students interrogate their privilege is one way of mitigating power differentials; another way is having them recognize the multitude of creative strategies urban school teachers and students employ in situations of structural racism and economic precarity. Because Sarah understood that space can be used to contest oppressive spatial imaginaries, she was more attuned to how marginalized communities actively repurpose spaces to create community. She noticed the ways in which students exercised agency over their school spaces, such as using the music studio to advance their dreams and interests. Moreover, school leaders' own attention to space and commitment to repurposing the school in ways that give students more control fostered the redistribution of power within a university-community relationship.

Conclusion

Overall, we argue that engaging in community-based learning requires students to both develop a structural understanding of urban inequalities and recognize the ways in which marginalized communities are already repurposing spaces to create community in spite of racially exclusive geographies. Because community-based learning is a growing practice among colleges, it is crucial that these factors be examined in order to orient college students toward social change rather than simply "doing good," and to create more equitable partnerships.

With these conclusions, we put forth the following suggestions for others engaged in creating community-based learning opportunities. In courses, faculty can assign readings such as those presented in this article, that introduce students to a critical geography framework. In hindsight, Roseann would have also created an assignment that asked students to write a spatial history of their school site by applying insights from critical geography readings. Faculty may also consider organizing a neighborhood walk around the

school site including having students conduct an asset-based inventory of the "funds of knowledge" in that neighborhood—i.e., community cultural wealth specific to a geographic location (Yosso, 2005). Lastly, partnering with an urban school that is similarly oriented in its values and mission was a major boon. It allowed coordinators from Swarthmore College and The Workshop School to be on the same page in terms of guiding student collaborations.

It is important for students and universities to consider their place in the community context and how their actions impact the communities they hope to engage with. Carefully considering space as one among other components of community-based learning not only adds value to student learning, but also develops an orientation toward social change, rather than "doing good," and facilitates more equal power relations between universities and the surrounding communities.

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