

Community-Engaged Impact Entrepreneurship: Organizing Reciprocal
Partnerships for a More Democratic Economy

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Abstract

This article explores the intersection of theoretical understandings and practical expressions of reciprocity. Using a campus/community partnership focused on developing an impact entrepreneurship, this article considers the evolving process associated with cultivating different orientations to reciprocal partnerships, with voices from the student, community partner, and faculty perspectives.

Keywords: entrepreneurship, community, partnerships, faculty, student, economy, reciprocity

Introduction

Community-engaged scholarship—and a range of campus/community partnerships—have emerged as higher education’s response to a range of contemporary social, political, and economic issues. The emerging academic discipline of community engagement—associated with the democratic engagement movement—is beginning to consider the nature of effective democratic partnerships. One of the most pressing challenges associated with supporting effective campus/community partnerships is coordinating the actions of multiple stakeholders that are both reciprocal and achieve positive community impact. This article presents a range of perspectives on the process associated with maintaining reciprocity within a partnership focused on addressing needs created by government policies that underfund public education and social programs. Our conceptual research examines the process of communicating varying conceptualizations of reciprocity across multiple boundaries and perspectives of a campus/community partnership. This grew out of the creation of a social enterprise connected to the Garden at Eden Autism Services of Florida in Naples, Florida.

Theoretical Basis

The general commitment to public education and social programs has been dramatically reduced since the neoliberal turn of the 1980s (Harvey, 2005). Neoliberalism is generally defined as the governing ideology that is used to justify the shrinking role of the state, expansion of private property, and the general commodification and financialization of everyday life. The contemporary ideology of neoliberalism assumes that the government has a very limited role in providing services and entitlements that collectively contribute to the public good. Neoliberalism is the central ideological paradigm that informs common understandings of how the individual relates to society. As a result, education has been increasingly seen as a private good, not a public one.

The neoliberal paradigm has shaped how public education is funded. Government disinvestment of public education has led to a form of academic capitalism within higher education (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Most institutions of higher education understand their role within the neoliberal regime as being a hub for technology transfer, technocratic consulting, and/or policy expertise. The dominant model that guides the way stakeholders leverage university-located capital is generally focused on redefining the entrepreneurial agency of students

and faculty (Mars & Rhoades, 2012).

The neoliberal model of university-located entrepreneurship is not consistent with the principles of community engagement. Scholar-practitioners located within the field of community engagement are beginning to consider how economic development strategies can be articulated in a way that is consistent with the principles of community engagement. (e.g., reciprocity, mutual benefit, and exchange of knowledge and resources, all defined in terms of partnership). Kimmel, Hull, Stephenson, Robertson, and Cowgill (2011) provide a model of economic development focused on cultivating the capacity of entire communities to advance the environmental sustainability movement through social entrepreneurship. Our work picks up where Kimmel et al. (2011) left off by considering the interpersonal dimension associated with producing conceptions of reciprocity within campus/community partnerships. Our framework provides a direct response to neoliberalism and general disinvestment of the public good.

Context and Description of Impact Entrepreneurship

The ideological commitment that has justified decreased spending on public education and social programs contextualizes the challenges Eden Autism Services of Florida confront. As a response to limited resources and general disinvestment, Eden Autism Services was forced to maintain essential educational programming through participation in competitive markets and increased entrepreneurial activities. Using existing infrastructure, stakeholders were able to develop a wormery operation, which not only had revenue potential but also aligned with the schools commitment to environmental sustainability. The growth of the wormery enterprise and the focus on reciprocity are two local responses to the outcomes of neoliberal ideology. The principles of community engagement and the methods associated with democratic engagement were leveraged to move toward more just and equitable social, political, and economic practices.

The Eden wormery was developed initially using the methods of democratic engagement and incorporated sophisticated conceptions of reciprocity. Students, faculty, and community partners worked together to increase the organizational capacity of Eden. These partners used community-engaged scholarship and service-learning pedagogies, connected to a section of the Foundations of Civic Engagement course at Florida Gulf Coast University, to start a social enterprise associated with worm-casting production.

Eden Autism Services of Florida facilitates two schools that serve students from ages 3 to 21 with the full range of autism spectrum disorders. The Naples program includes a 5-acre organic garden that is used as an educational tool to teach students agricultural skills— cultivating and growing organic fruits and vegetables as well as instruction on harvesting and preparing healthy meals. Sustainable agriculture practices allow students to experience the cycle of food without chemical intervention. To achieve this, the school established a wormery which utilizes the local waste stream. Students not only use the castings to aid in growing their own products but also sell the castings to help underwrite the garden project. To further encourage the goals of sustainability and develop the students' communication needs, Eden's students grow vegetables and fruits to donate to local food banks.

The project is implemented solely through volunteer participation and currently exists on a small budget of money earned from selling the products of the school's community garden. As the state defunded the school, it became increasingly difficult to offset the loss with donations and budget cuts alone. Although the social entrepreneurial model indirectly affirms the decision of the state to defund public education and social programs, it provides a mechanism to fill important unmet social needs.

Research Methods

Our research employs the method of civic dialogue, expressed as a variant of deliberative polling, to develop a theoretically informed examination of reciprocity within the democratic engagement process. Our civic dialogue method embodied the two key values of political equality and deliberation. By political equality, we mean that each participant in the civic dialogue had equal voice. We relied on a conception of deliberation that assumed that through the process of discussion each of the participant's contributions would be evaluated on his or her own merits. The research of Fishkin and Farrar (2005) informed our understanding of the concepts of political equality and deliberation. Each participant in our partnership considered how different orientations to reciprocity informed the democratic engagement process. Our findings and research methods advance our understanding of reciprocal partnerships because it creates an inclusive space for student and community partner voices. Each stage of the democratic engagement process and method was intentionally designed and tracked to reflect the unique perspective that each participant brought to the partnership.

The first stage of the democratic engagement method was connected to an interdisciplinary semester-long course, Foundations of Civic Engagement. The course covered democratic engagement methods, discussed theories of democracy, and required students to connect forms of civic and democratic engagement to their specific disciplinary backgrounds. While completing the Foundations of Civic Engagement course, the students, faculty member, and community partner developed a civic-engagement project that was connected to the course themes and increased the organizational capacity of Eden. The partnership negotiation connected to the civic engagement project used the framework developed by Sandmann and Kliewer (2012) to ensure that power differentials did not undermine the group's commitment to democratic equality, reciprocity, and mutual benefit. Our project design carefully accounted for the ways power is produced at individual, organizational, and institutional levels.

The methods of democratic engagement used to design the civic engagement project not only shaped the direction of the project but also informed the reflection process. Our partnership was explicitly connected to an effort to reinvigorate the sentiments of democracy and the larger institutional spaces of democratic practice. Once we completed the civic-engagement project, each individual considered how theoretical conceptions of reciprocity informed the way they expressed reciprocity in their democratic engagement practice and in the context of the partnership. Each actor in the partnership read Dostillio et al. (2012) to develop a theoretical understanding of three orientations to reciprocity. After reviewing the different orientations to reciprocity, each participant—individually and collectively—considered the theoretical relationship of reciprocity to democratic engagement practice. The common theoretical reference point ensured a consistent language and common basis to consider elements of reciprocity across different areas of the campus/community partnership.

Initially each partner's reflection process was conducted independently of the larger group. This allowed for different ways of knowing and learning to inform the way each participant developed their own understanding of how theory informed their democratic practice. Collectively, we intentionally used civic dialogue to consider how our individual conceptions of reciprocity affected the democratic engagement process. We included a reflection element in our partnership agreement for three reasons. First, the reflection process enhances the learning experience for all of the stakeholders involved in the partnership. Second,

through meaningful reflection, our group was able to assess the quality of our partnership and identify the future direction of our democratic relationship. Third, through meaningful reflection, we were all able to develop a more complex understanding of democratic practice and action.

The conceptual and theoretical understandings expressed in this article originate from each of the participants within the partnership individually. For example, Sarah Neat wrote the student section as a composite narrative from the experiences of all of the students involved in the project. The initial draft of each section was developed after completing two civic dialogue sessions that lasted approximately one-hour each. The first civic dialogue covered topics related to the civic engagement project, democratic engagement, reciprocity, and the orientations of reciprocity described in the Dostillio et al. (2012) article. Dr. Brandon W. Kliewer gave a brief 15-minute informational presentation on the role reciprocity has historically had in democratic theory and community-engaged scholarship. The second civic dialogue session was approximately one hour and was focused on responding to each partner's perspective of reciprocity and discussing how each perspective of reciprocity helped our partnership leverage the democratic engagement method to support meaningful community action and authentic partnership.

Sarah Neat: Student Perspective

My community engagement experience was a story of growth, evolution, and redemption. My initial approach to the partnership process was a form of reciprocity focused on exchange. However, over time, the methods of democratic engagement illuminated a more robust understanding of reciprocity. From what I know by experience, we are a generation of “me.” Or, perhaps not of “me,” but of “no one else is helping, so why should I have to?” My personal sentiment as a student required to fulfill service-learning criteria was that I did not want to do it—I will do community good when I have decided that I want to. My own conclusion was that community service was put in place because people were unwilling to do the paid job, as typically these jobs are low pay with little to no benefits. My belief was that the claim that service-learning helps students succeed in college is simply because service-learning work was required to pass the class.

Performing service learning in this grade-motivated model is still a reciprocal act—if I did the work, I would get my slips signed and I would pass the

class. Thus, at the beginning of my service-learning experience, I thought of reciprocity in terms of exchange. Many students enjoy this kind of reciprocity because they are lazy, while some enjoy it because following orders is all that they know. Occasionally, however, students feel comfortable because performing community service is what they do best. Sadly, only one of these situations is based on community need.

As a student, I had thoroughly expected my outcome to be the same as my other required service-learning classes. I would do menial work for a good grade, the kind of project that I could easily do and complete as quickly as possible. The professor of my civic engagement course, however, had something different in mind. Students in the class were required to organized into groups that would take on a community issue and create a long-lasting solution utilizing very specific methods of engagement. Initially, I decided I was going to do the least amount of work possible, a decision that made my journal more tumultuous than it needed to be. While I didn't like finding that I was beginning to be personally and heartfelt part of the partnership, I was wrong in my pre-conceived notions about community service learning.

I found that my civic engagement transformed me from a hapless student given an assignment into an involved and willing agent of change. As suggestions went out for issues to change within the community, I listened carefully to everyone else as they spoke. I had no ideas of my own and had wished that the situation was nothing but a bad dream from which I would awake. When my turn came to speak, I did not mention something to change within the community, but instead I spoke of my talents and what I could give in exchange for the project. Included in my initial public announcement were the talents of artwork, early childhood education, and an offering of my gardening hobby in hopes something significantly interesting would reveal itself.

From my perspective, I would offer my talents to a community organization in exchange for a passing grade. I ended up working with the community partner that was trying to revitalize the Garden at Eden for children and adults with autism. I had surmised that this opportunity would allow me to be mindless and carefree, carrying on with my simple duties and hands-on work instead of having to engage in thought-provoking brainstorming about change within the community.

Once I had been educated about the current state of the Garden at Eden, I

suddenly felt obligated to help and my effort was no longer purely motivated by earning a passing grade. Granted, I would be lying if I were to say the grade no longer mattered, but the effort was no longer a hardship, especially because of my increased admiration for our partnership. Something inside of me awakened, not as just a student but as someone who has taught and cared for children, as someone who cares for the earth in her own time, and as someone who also saw an opportunity to learn and combine all of these interests while doing some community good.

Democratic engagement helped me realize the transformative potential of community partnerships, and I began to understand more complicated meanings of reciprocity. I now felt as if I had a duty to something more meaningful than just getting a grade on a class project. The work we were planning on doing had begun with revitalization, but as we spoke together and volunteered our time to weeding and cleaning the garden, we knew that something else had to happen to obtain funding for the garden and wormery.

Our group revisited what had previously been done to earn income for the garden and the composting worms—selling the worm castings and the produce from the garden. I began to see myself contributing to a partnership larger than myself the moment we decided to adopt a social or impact entrepreneurial model. I began to understand how our partnership was generating an approach to a problem that I could not have imagined at the beginning of the project. I realized the potential of partnerships that start from a position of equality and support collaboration. I had connected with the people with whom I collaborated. Something new was born of this collective effort and the intentional methods of democratic engagement—I was no longer part of the “me” generation. I understood that to enact our plan we would have to work together and that each of us had to accepted responsibility to each other. Through the democratic engagement process, my relationship to others in the group and the community partnership transformed. Of course, we completed the initial wormery project, but my role within the organization eventually evolved to include a new dimension. My role in defining the partnership created a transformed space for me to develop new art initiatives for the school.

Currently, the plans for the art program are just beginning, slowly evolving as my community partner, and I talk about the resources available to both the school and the garden, as well as the time within a scheduled domain of availability. With the act of engagement within my local community by requirement, I was

encouraged by relationships and personal growth to effect formative exchange and generative change with those that surrounded me.

Elizabeth Quinter: Community Partner Perspective

As a mother of one of the students that attends Eden, Mikey, aged 12, who was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome at the age of 9, and as an environmental studies student at Florida Gulf Coast University, nothing seemed more fitting than helping the students in this garden initiative. After all, one of the reasons that I chose to send my son to Eden was because of their garden program.

While working as a volunteer at the Garden at Eden, I quickly became aware of the financial difficulties the program was facing. The program could no longer afford to keep a paid staff member, and I was offered the opportunity to take over the management of the garden as an unpaid volunteer. This role included organizing and running a community garden with a dozen fellow gardeners; designing, implementing and delivering the students' educational programming; and overseeing and maintaining the worm-casting enterprise. However, even with a prior background in environmental studies and business studies as well as prior experience in organic gardening, the role presented daunting challenges. Of the myriad obstacles I faced, none were more immediately pressing than finding a way to keep the program thriving on a zero-dollar budget while simultaneously developing partnerships that could help with the vast amount of work that lay ahead.

The absence of state support has hit an all time low. Over a 2-year period, Eden Services was forced into a very precarious financial situation. With a reduction in state funding for educational programs and a sharp decrease in charitable contributions to the school, Eden was forced to make some critical budget decisions. Given this onerous atmosphere, it came as no surprise to discover that the future existence of the garden was imminently threatened. In order to save the garden program from termination, it was clear that the garden would have to become self-sustainable.

I was fully invested in keeping both the garden and environmental education program. I had witnessed first-hand the immense value this program was having. The benefits that contact with nature was having on my child and the rest of the students involved in the educational program were astonishing. They were more engaged in the learning process than I had seen before and, moreover, the

long-term benefits of learning vocational skills would be invaluable to any student, let alone students facing the barriers of having a disability.

The garden and wormery had been neglected over the summer, and consequently, due to the sale of much of the farming equipment, it was determined that it would be impossible to sustain the garden solely through the sale of plants and vegetables. In light of these concerns, the problem of where to begin was as pressing as it was baffling. After much thought, it became clear that the most suitable area on which to focus was the worm-casting business. Worm castings offered the possibility of securing a profit, something essential to our very existence. Working with the worms also afforded all the children at Eden, both high and low functioning individuals, the opportunity to gain both vocational and educational experience. Additionally, working with worms gave us the chance to utilize the very significant “waste stream” in Southwest Florida, which, as our ideas unfolded, confirmed that the whole enterprise was environmentally sound.

From the perspective of a mother, I wanted nothing more than to continue to witness the positive effects the garden project was having on my child and the other children at the school. It was clear that a relationship with the local community and larger partnership process would be needed to achieve our goals for the garden. Initially, I thought Eden could form a reciprocal relationship with a local business to gain the help we so desperately needed and, in return, give produce back to our helpers. However, the business community did not have the partnership stakeholders that Eden had envisioned. Much of the business community was unwilling to develop a partnership that was reciprocal or mutually beneficial.

Throughout this process, I had been in close contact with Eden's Naples director, Susan Suarez, who was well aware of the difficulties we faced. Most fortuitously, Suarez had received e-mail from Jessica Rhea, the Director of Service-Learning at Florida Gulf Coast University, where, incidentally, I was also a student. Rhea introduced the idea of including Eden as a “Make a Difference Day” site. This initiative, which is an annual, nationwide community-service event, offers students, faculty, and local business directors the opportunity to assist in a series of community-based projects. At the same time that Rhea and I were discussing the needs of Eden and how “Make a Difference Day” could benefit the garden initiative, I had been assigned a civic-engagement project for a course I was taking with Brandon W. Kliewer.

The objective of the project was to increase the capacity of a community organization using methods of democratic engagement that were included in the course curriculum. The ultimate goal in completing the project was to generate a scholarly product that would result in long-term benefits for the organization and address core dimensions of a community issue. At this point, it became clear that I could utilize both of the university's "Make a Difference Day" and the structure of the course--specifically the partnership process associated with the methods of democratic engagement--to improve the financial situation of Eden.

To be able to reflect on the Eden project and its needs as a community partner, and as a student, offered an invaluable insight in developing my understanding of reciprocity and partnership. Using the structure provided by the methods of democratic engagement, we were able to avoid limiting our conception of partnership to mere exchange. Instead, we organized a group of key stakeholders that collaborated to address a community issue. Initially, we formed the partnership in terms of exchange. Through a series of individual and coordinated exchanges we could complete the requirements of the course and increase the organizational capacity of the Garden at Eden. The combining of our different backgrounds, knowledge, and skills led to a true entrepreneurial collaboration.

We attempted to use the methods of democratic engagement to shape the partnership but also ensure that the scholarly-product was co-produced. From my perspective, as a student and community partner, the applied understanding of reciprocity evolved throughout the partnership process. By adhering to the engagement methods highlighted in the Foundation of Civic Engagement course, we created an inclusive space that produced collaborative ideas. The simple conversations around bag design led to more sophisticated understandings of our partnerships and more meaningful ways we could leverage partnerships to help Eden achieve its mission.

The essence of the wormery and our civic-engagement project is captured in the relationship between the local businesses that donate their organic waste to Eden. Their relationship rallies far beyond a mere exchange.

Although the implications of such a relationship go far beyond the purpose of this essay, it is essential to point that it parallels a generativity-oriented forms of reciprocity, whereby everything is related . Ultimately, this kind of relationship "can effect a change in what entities *do* or in what and how entities *are*" (Dostillio

et al, 25), thereby transforming both Eden and the partners into stewards of the earth. The partnership process has transformed the environmental education program at Eden. The structure associated with the methods of democratic engagement have changed the way Eden is thinking about collaboration, cooperation, and engagement.

Brandon W. Kliewer: Faculty Perspective

From my perspective, as a faculty member, the influence and conceptualization of reciprocity informed my role in the partnership. In essence, I facilitated an ongoing conversation about recognizing how theoretical elements of the democratic engagement process could help lead to meaningful community action.

It is often difficult to operationalize principles of community-engaged scholarship in relation to community engagement practice. The structure of my course introduced students to the methods of democratic engagement as a path to building partnerships consistent with the principles of community engagement. The civic-engagement project proposal was intentionally designed to help shape the space in which students and community partners negotiate the terms of their partnerships.

The course curriculum introduced students to basic theoretical approaches and techniques of critical thinking, civic/community problem solving, and civic/community dialogue. These theoretical topics and practical expressions were overlaid in a series of course requirements that structured the formation of campus/community partnerships. Although the basis of the campus/community partnership was structured by the course design, students and community partners had significant space to define unique dimensions of the partnership within the space produced by the intentional methods of democratic engagement. In many ways, the structure of the course provided institutional norms consistent with principles of democracy that ensured the partnership was negotiated along fair and equal terms.

The Foundations of Civic Engagement course was designed intentionally to ensure students and community partners discuss the parameters of partnership and reciprocity in an inclusive space defined by principles of democracy. The curriculum of the course was developed through a process that included student feedback, faculty experiences, and community partners' input focused on what type

of course they wanted to see supporting forms of community engagement. Instead of coercing students and community partners within a uniform partnership rubric and in relation to a central authority, elements of the course were constructed to create a democratic space for students and community partners to develop their own partnerships. As a faculty member, my role was primarily focused on facilitating and supporting the partnership process produced using the methods of democratic engagement. The structure of my course was used to define a full range of orientations to reciprocity. In fact, every relationship between the various students in my course and the community partners took on unique features. The decentralized organization of the partnership process more accurately mimics the conditions of democratic practice. Students and community partners were able to use the space created by the course to negotiate the partnerships along terms of democratic equality and reciprocity.

Conclusion and Implications

The role campus/community partnerships have in redefining the nature of the 21st-century economy are still undefined. This conceptual research begins to highlight the subjective perspectives involved in this process. In order for the methods of democratic engagement to effectively transform social, political, and economic relationships, it is essential to begin to incorporate different ways of knowing and the principles of community engagement in the cultivation of partnerships. The results of this theoretical partnership exploration illustrate three key points and highlights future research directions.

First, achieving reciprocal partnerships will require time, commitment, and process. It is often rhetorically assumed that campus/community partnerships achieve reciprocity organically. However, when considered from the student, community partner, and faculty perspective, the partnership process is iterative and has no defined path. The result of this composite narrative does not provide a universal approach to reciprocity. Instead, the theoretical exploration highlights the types of themes that emerge when students, community partners, and faculty consider building partnerships that are reciprocal and align with the principles of community engagement.

Second, this theoretical exploration illustrated how different stakeholders understood reciprocity and the partnership process. This theoretical exploration demonstrates the need for more theoretical research and practical applications to

include different ways of knowing and understanding into the democratic engagement process.

Finally, when considering reciprocity in relation to campus/community partnerships, neoliberal ideology and larger structures of inequality ought to be an explicit part of the process. In this case, the systematic defunding of public education and general abdication of responsibilities, once reserved to the state, produced this community issue. This context cannot and should not be forgotten. As a result, any campus/community partnership should also be produced in relation to larger organization, coordination, and mobilization efforts. The current body of community engagement theory fails to adequately consider campus-community partnerships in relation to neoliberalism. (See Kliewer, 2012, for a more in depth explanation of how neoliberalism intersects community engagement theory and practice). The transformative potential of the democratic engagement movement would be more coherent if it were defined in relation to undermining structures of neoliberalism.

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Elizabeth Quinter has a background in business and finance, environmental studies and horticulture and environmental education. Elizabeth has used her skills to advocate for people on the autism spectrum. Her son, Mikey, was diagnosed with autism at the age of 9, since then Elizabeth has been involved in a variety of educational and vocational projects that have enhanced the quality of life and work opportunities for people on the autism spectrum. Elizabeth is currently working on plans with Easter Seals in Naples to launch a working farm that will offer pre-vocational skills and employment to local individuals with disabilities.



Sarah Neat is an Art Major at Florida Gulf Coast University. She has experience working in preschool education at Zion Lutheran Early Childhood Center, and aspires to work as an illustrator and author of children's books. Sarah has also had experience in teaching dance as well as singing in a professional chorus. Currently she is working on an art series for her major, which explores the psychology of PTSD abuse victims.