

**Educational Organizing: Working with Hands and Head and Heart
[An analysis of Beth Broadway's Practitioner Profile]**

**Margo Hittleman
Department of Education
Cornell University**

I set out in this paper to analyze a story. I soon found myself wandering through a tortuous thicket of words that grew ever more tangled. I began again, and again was soon lost in a labyrinth that seemed to branch every which way but toward the central core. Martha Nussbaum's warning tugged ever more insistently at my mind:

How can we hope to confront these characters and their predicament, if not in these words and sentences, whose very ellipses and circumnavigations rightly convey the lucidity of their bewilderment, the precision of the indefiniteness? Any pretense that we could paraphrase this scene without losing its moral quality would belie the argument that I am about to make (Nussbaum 1990: 149).

Beth Broadway's story stands whole in its vibrant detail. It excites; it confounds. It amuses and it annoys. It captures our hearts and moves our minds. It is richly characterized, and its geography is vast. It is this very wholeness, with all of its myriad, concrete particulars, that serves to teach lessons worth learning about the complexly human job of community organizing. I asked myself again and again, "How can I most effectively communicate to others the best of what is here?" Again and again, the answer that came was the same: hand them the profile and say, "Read this!"

I knew that would not suffice. Yet my commentaries paled in comparison to the stories they sought to describe. To offer more than an watered-down repetition of ideas

far more eloquently expressed in their original detail would require, as Nussbaum suggests, an equally evocative narrative. It would require another story.

I do not yet have such a story. But I do have a deadline. And so I will begin with the questions that may yet lead to a new story. How do we do community organizing in a way that is deeply educational, by which I mean, how do we construct a process for public deliberation, decision making and action that enables people to learn? How do we educate in a way that organizes, by which I mean, in a way that brings people together to change not only themselves, but the world in which they live? How do we create spaces – particularly public spaces – that make possible the kind of learning we would call “transformational,” learning that enables people not just to extend their skills, but to enlarge their perspectives? How do we challenge unjust systems and practices while simultaneously building a community that includes those who control such systems? How do we help people talk about oppression, and power, and inequality, and injustice in ways that are simultaneously honest and compassionate, and that reflect the devastating costs on both sides of the equation? How do we develop people’s confidence and capacity, while helping them to question the ways their thinking remains limited and confused? How can we move those captivated by reflection to act, and help those compelled to act to reflect? To what extent and in what ways, in a culturally and ethnically diverse (and divided) society, can we talk about “community” and “caring” and “democracy” and “participation” in ways that are meaningful and profound? And what is it, ultimately, that we are seeking to produce anyway?

As anyone who has participated in public deliberation, decision making or action knows, it is not enough to simply to get a group of people (even the right group of

people) into the room and hope for the best. Far too much can go wrong—and usually does. Nor is it enough to resolutely grasp a carefully constructed theoretical map for determining, for example, whether the decisions made through such a process are legitimate (democratic, fair, just, etc.) – much as such a guide may be immensely helpful in evaluating the processes we propose or have implemented, or the outcomes we have chosen. For in any gathering, people are sometimes rational and sometimes emotional, and most often, a mix of the two. They bring complexly intertwined histories (both public and private) of privilege and mistreatment, common sense and befuddlement, connection and alienation, hope and despair. The result is a messy process that must not only accommodate that which is inherently human, but foster its emergence as well. And yet, as a society (both within and outside the academy), we are profoundly suspicious of that kind of human messiness in the public realm. Even those willing to tolerate its (inevitable) appearance rarely advocate that we might benefit from intentionally seeking to promote it as a goal.

Here is where Broadway's narrative can help. There is much in Broadway's discussion of her work that can help us construct a new story about educational organizing, social learning and public deliberation and action, a story that helps us to see what we might *do* and *how*, and a story that can help us to animate a theoretical discourse that too often remains antiseptic and abstract (and decidedly *not* messy).

Let me begin with Broadway's description of the neighborhood planning process in Syracuse's Northside, a traditionally Italian-American working-class neighborhood that recently has seen the arrival of a large number of Southeast Asian immigrants and smaller numbers of Native Americans. Through this city-sponsored process, Broadway assisted

residents to develop democratically elected neighborhood planning councils, made up of members of all the neighborhood associations that had ten or more members. These planning councils were to develop visions, goals, and five-year plans for their neighborhoods. But, Broadway notes:

It was very clear on the Northside that we weren't going to be able to move very far until we had some better understanding among the various cultures that were there. So concomitantly to the development of the neighborhood planning coalitions – the coalitions still continued to meet monthly – we identified implicit leaders from each of the various ethnic groups on the Northside. ... This group of twelve leaders and I met once a month for a year, basically to talk about racism. ... [T]hat work was critical to the coalition being able to survive.

Nonchalantly buried within these few sentences are several vitally important lessons about the relationship between the “soft” work of building relationships and the “gritty” work of public planning, decision making and action. Too often, debates about the most appropriate focus for community organizing center around whether to foreground relationship-building *or* action. Those arguing for the latter suggest that if we put too much attention on building relationships, people will “feel good,” but little of the desperately needed public work will get done. Opponents counter that vitally important discussions related to power and participation (the dynamics of racism, for example) get swept under the rug when too much emphasis is placed on decision-making and action, and too little on the interactions between people.

Broadway's story, as it unfolds, shows us that we needn't choose “either ... or.” In fact, she offers us a process for “both ... and”: the two groups met concomitantly. While the neighborhood planning council moved forward on a planning process that involved public deliberation and decision making, a second, smaller group of leaders meet to

develop “better understanding among the various cultures.” As Broadway observes, this work of talking about racism “was critical to the [neighborhood planning] coalition being able to survive.” And as we will see, *both* activities ultimately led to public actions that addressed neighborhood problems.

Not surprisingly, getting the leaders from the various ethnic communities to come together was not easy; mistrust ran deep. The organizing process took six months, during which Broadway “kept meeting with people, kept talking to people, kept connecting people.” It was, in part, a “blow-up” (about the development of a pool hall) that became “racially tinged” that helped people “realize that they really did have to talk to each other.” And so, the twelve leaders agreed to meet.

Broadway continues:

We set ground rules again. And then I had them notice that they really didn't know each other very well, even though they were all leaders. I asked them if they had questions for each other. What did they want to know about each other? What were they wondering about each other?

From the start, Broadway takes a very specific approach to a public discussion about racism. She doesn't suggest that people begin by talking about the racially tinged “blow-up” or even the controversial pool hall. Rather, she continues the approach (“connecting people”) she had taken to help get people to the table in the first place. In pointing out that people “didn't really know each other very well,” Broadway doesn't erase either their individual or group histories, cultures or perspectives in the name of building “community” and establishing some sort of pretentious “unity.” Rather, she encourages them to ask about those differences while simultaneously directing their attention to their shared human connection.

It is in the course of asking such questions that one of the Italian elders, Joe, asks: “I want to know why you people came and moved in and took over my neighborhood.”

Broadway says:

Well, we were off on a merry chase! ...[P]eople started to talk about how they ended up in Syracuse and how they did, in fact, come in to live on the Northside. ...[W]hat emerged out of that was this whole story from each of the people around the effect of the Vietnam War on their people, the role that they played and their families played in the Vietnam War that made it impossible for them to stay in Southeast Asia. A whole host of stories came out of that. Incredible stories of people journeying down the Ho Chi Minh trail on a bicycle non-stop for 72, fleeing. Amazing stories of living in refugee camps. And the Italian people began to connect that story with the story of their own immigration. We got out a map, and the people looked at the map and really saw where Vietnam was, where Cambodia was, started to talk about the Khmer Rouge.

In short, people started to learn. But they (the Italian-Americans) did more than learn intellectually (e.g., where Vietnam and Cambodia were, what the Khmer Rouge did). And they did more than learn about the life histories of their Southeast Asian neighbors. They “began to connect that story with the story of their own immigration.” They began to learn about themselves. But the learning went even further, fostered by Broadway’s tactic of using well-chosen questions to help people make personal connections – to their shared experience, and to their shared humanity beneath the particular differences in experience:

I would occasionally interject a question, “Well, does somebody else want to talk about that?” Or “How did your parents get here from Italy and what was the circumstance there?” One of the issues that the Italians kept raising was that people wanted to raise chickens in their backyards. And they started talking about their own grandmothers who were raising chickens in *their* yards on the Northside. And it was like these light bulbs kept going on for people around immigration and what is immigration and why

people leave their homeland and what happens when people have to leave their homelands.

The result was deep social learning (learning about “what is immigration and why people leave their homeland”). But it was also learning with a richness, and, I would argue, a staying power that would have been impossible to achieve through even the most engaging lectures about racism, immigration, colonialism, the misguided politics of the Vietnam War, or the like. Rather, it was through stories – stories told in answer to a very specific, very personal, deeply felt (if awkwardly articulated) question – that people found the commonalities within their differences to construct, for themselves, a dramatically new social understanding.

But the learning did not stop here. Noticing that Joe, the man who asked the original “taking over my neighborhood” question had not said much for several sessions, Broadway asked him what he was thinking about. His answer is gripping:

[H]e said, “You know, I don’t want to offend you,” and he was looking at the Asian people. He said, “But I just have to tell you that I went to Korea and I was told by my government that I was supposed to hate you people.” And he said, “I was given a bayonet and I was given a big sandbag and I was told every morning for an hour and a half to jam that bayonet into a bag and say ‘Kill the gook.’ And I did it every day, every day, every day, every day for two and a half years.” And he said, “And then I sent my son to Vietnam. And my son was supposed to kill you people. And now I’m thinking, maybe I got brainwashed by my government.”

Here, our heart catches, as Broadway’s story finds its deepest power, for Joe’s learning is nothing if not transformational. But that realization transforms those of us listening to his story as well. For whatever our original response to his initial question, we can no longer dismiss him as “other,” just as he can no longer dismiss his Southeast Asian neighbors. Through a heightened awareness of our shared limitations and

confusions, our vulnerability and capacity to learn—that is, through a heightened awareness of our shared humanity—we, too, change. Our perception of the world is transformed. We not only look at Joe differently, but at others like Joe.

Such realizations take us back to the questions I posed at the beginning of this essay: how do we organizing in a way that is deeply educational? How do we educate in a way that organizes? How do we create public spaces that make possible the kind of learning we would call “transformational.” How do we help people talk about oppression, and power, and inequality, and injustice in ways that are simultaneously honest and compassionate, and that reflect the devastating costs on both sides of the equation? How do we develop people’s confidence and capacity, while helping them to question the ways their thinking remains limited and confused?

The answer, drawn from Broadway’s narrative, argues for creating public spaces and processes that enable people to find their shared humanity (and thus, their shared interests as well), that simultaneously promote relationship-building *and* action, subsuming neither imperative to the other. The answer also argues for a process that encourages people to engage in talk that is concrete, particular, personal, emotional—alongside the more rational and intellectual discourse of problem-solving, policymaking, plan building. After all, it was by sharing stories about concrete, human experiences involving bicycles and chickens, not abstract social-political-economic analyses, that people were, in fact, able to begin to develop a radically new social-political-economic analysis.

The Northside story is deeply touching on an emotional level. But it’s important to note that this social learning was not unrelated to the very real, very pressing neighborhood planning problems that the neighborhood councils had been formed to

address, problems such as, what do we do when a group of new immigrants want to raise chickens in the middle of a 21st-century American city? Although Broadway doesn't tell us how that particular issue was resolved, she does show us how an issue such as flushing chicken heads down the toilets was shifted from moral judgments about people's characters or intelligence to the more tractable question of how to help new immigrants understand the city's sewer system – and a plan for an educational project to be undertaken by the Southeast Asian Center.

Not insignificantly, the sense and definition of who constitutes “community” in the Northside also changed. As Broadway tells us:

“[A]t every Northside neighbors' event now – [the Italian-Americans] do a Memorial Day celebration in the park where they get the soldiers to reenact a war scene and they do a lot of Italian festivals—and in the last couple of years, the Hmong dancers are there, the Chinese dragon is there. They figured out that they need to work together. And two of the leaders of the Northside neighbors' group came into the Neighborhood Leadership Training program and decided that they needed to do a joint project with the Southeast Asians.”

Finally, this story shows us that the work of educational organizing must also include cultivating a respectful patience, because learning (particularly transformational learning) takes time. We might make judgments quickly, but we learn slowly. Yet too often, in public arenas, people are unwilling or unable to extend each other the time necessary to learn. It is not hard to imagine a question like the one Joe originally posed derailing the entire effort. Had the others responded by lambasting Joe for his racism (as often happens in decidedly “progressive” cities like Ithaca where a theoretical understanding often surpasses a personal one), Joe is unlikely to have had the chance to fully listen to his neighbors' stories. Nor would he have had the chance to tell his own, equally heart-

wrenching, story. It is a testament to both Broadway's skills as organizer/facilitator and the members of the group as a whole that they didn't take this path.

Providing an extended period of time in which people can learn might seem difficult to defend in face of an urgently felt—and well-grounded—need for change. But without it, Joe is unlikely to have concluded, “maybe I got brainwashed by my government.” And thus, there is a lesson here for those who seek to promote *sustainable* social change. For if we desire ever-larger numbers of people to change not only themselves, but the world in which they live, we must organize in a way that encourages people to learn – and offers them the time in which to do so.

In closing, I am reminded of the caption an elderly Los Angeles artist selected to accompany her painting, exhibited in a show of Jewish folk art show organized by anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff in the early 1980s. The unidentified painter wrote: “A person who works only with her hands is a laborer. A person who works with hands and head is an artisan. But a person who works with hands and head and heart is an artist” (Myerhoff 1982: 292). In the Northside story, we see a type of community organizing that integrates hands and head and heart, and that in doing so, elevates such work to a kind of art. Beth Broadway's narrative shows us that this is not only possible, it offers us insight into how it might be done.

References cited

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