

Connecting Courses, Curriculum, and Community in Chicago

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Cite as: Hague, E. (2020). Connecting Courses, Curriculum, and Community in Chicago. *Metropolitan Universities*, 31(2), 7-17 DOI: 10.18060/23923

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Editor: Valerie L. Holton, Ph.D.

Introduction

I am deeply honored to receive the 2019 Barbara A. Holland Scholar-Administrator Award from the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU), as I believe strongly in interconnecting the elements of an urban institution: students, faculty, and community members, and integrating these within the classroom, curriculum, disciplinary structures, and administrative best practices. Additionally, I suggest that such an integrative approach should be fundamental to our scholarly practice, as teaching, research, and community engagement inform and reinforce each other. Our institutions give us opportunities to draw upon considerable resources that can be used to aid disadvantaged communities and, as professionals in the academy, we are well-positioned to pursue pedagogy that can make a difference in our society.

My passion for such integrative practice is rooted in my home discipline of geography, which has long grappled with the question of the relationships between communities and the academy. In 2020, geography is a vibrant, theoretically innovative, and community-engaged discipline. At its core, the discipline asks spatial questions that seek to understand how places and landscapes are created and understood. This can be the physical geography of Earth's landscapes and their geomorphology, or it can be, as I have chosen to study, its human landscapes. People shape landscapes for specific uses; they give places meaning and construct built environments that express those meanings. Understanding landscapes and places as meaningful and as being continually made and remade by people through myriad decisions, both small and large, leads to questions about who has the power to shape a landscape or give meaning to a place. It leads geographers to ask why places are like they are; to interrogate representations of places; and to explore the contested hegemonic meanings of places. This leads to examining which people, politics, and political systems impose and control the production of meanings, of landscapes, and

land uses, and how these relate to identities. Geographers are, therefore, driven to ask questions that put place and spatial relationships at the core of investigative analyses.

Within geography, many faculty are committed to community-based scholarship. Much of this engagement has been with urban communities and, over the past fifty years, has sought to advance a coproduction of geographical knowledge. Such practice was central to the influential work that became known in the early 1970s as radical geography. A vanguard for early entries of feminist, Marxist, and post-colonial thought into the discipline, radical geography sought “social relevancy” and “advocacy” for research projects (Peet, 1977, 2000), and was disseminated through *Antipode* its, at times irreverent, scholarly journal (Hague, 2002). The most explicit and subsequently celebrated expression of radical geography’s immersive practice to produce research that advances community change was Bunge’s (1971) bringing of geographical expertise to the service of the Detroit neighborhood of Fitzgerald (Merrifield, 1995; *Progress in Human Geography*, 2011). Peet (1977: 13-14), describes Bunge’s approach and its attendant call for academic geographers as community-engaged advocates and activists:

Geographers should form expeditions to the poorest and most blighted areas of the country, contributing rather than taking resources, planning *with* people rather than planning *for* them, incorporating local people rather than excluding them in an elitist way.

Work produced by Bunge as part of his Detroit Geographical Expedition (1968-73) was used to counter expansion plans of his former employer, Wayne State University, and by community organizations to advance campaigns against racially unequal schooling. “[A]dvocate geographers and planners,” Peet (1977: 15) explains, “offered their professional expertise to disenfranchised groups to help them deal with powerful institutions and eventually to shift power to the presently powerless.”

Although I am too young to have experienced the initial engagements of radical geography in the early 1970s, by the 1990s, flush with the discursive analyses of post-structuralism and the continued influence of Marxism, critical geography flourished, its theoretical syntheses and commitment to pursuing social justice resonating with a new generation of geographers who, by the early 2000s, had “significantly (if not completely) reoriented the discipline to the point where it is now—and this is not a total exaggeration—the center of radical social justice theorizing in the academy” (Mitchell, 2004: 765). Although both continuities and distinctions can be drawn between the radical geography of the 1970s and critical geography, Castree (2000, 956) raised a point that resonated with me and many of my peers, namely that the “spirit of engagement and activism” of the 1970s had been somewhat lost (cf. Hague, 2002) and, as a result, professional academics were less directly engaged in community struggles than those of previous generations. Yet, as Castree (2000, 959) outlined, “there is in principle nothing to stop today’s critical geographers reaching out from the academy in order to improve the world they study.” Attracted

by such contentions, and a determination to pursue an academic career that could draw upon the radical and critical branches of geography to offer assistance to communities, I have consistently sought opportunities to collaborate with people in the cities where I have worked to better understand a central question that animates much geographical research, namely explaining the relationships between people and places.

My own community engagement is also something of a family tradition: I have childhood memories of my faculty-member father writing a book about the impact of urban planning on Scottish public housing and his work with the communities organizing in opposition to technocratic and top-down local development proposals (C. Hague, 1984). Re-reading his book for this essay, I find my own perspectives echoing his calls for “a radical professionalism,” which “retain[s] an expertise, but that expertise would be rooted in self-awareness, with a consciousness of the ways in which the city is pervaded by ideology and sectional interests. It would be allied to the imagination to design alternatives and the technical ability to specify them” (C. Hague, 1984: 327). It was my father who suggested that when moving to Chicago in 2002 to take up a faculty position at DePaul University, I should draw upon the works of one of the city’s most famous community organizers, Saul Alinsky (1969, 1972) who argues that it is important when working with community organizations to let the local residents set the agenda of important issues to be addressed. What follows are two examples from my teaching that, influenced by these precedents, seek to intertwine the classroom with the community.

Two Curricular Examples

At DePaul, I have been fortunate to utilize the existing curricular structure and associated institutional support to develop distinctive, community-engaged courses. At the undergraduate level, DePaul requires all students to complete one experiential learning course, which can be an internship, study abroad, community-based service learning, or another hands on class that meets learning outcomes, and one freshman Explore Chicago course, which is an introduction to the city, university, and academic practice. This curricular flexibility has enabled me to bring the resources of my courses, and the social justice foci of geographical theory and disciplinary practices, first, to assist community organizing through a long term community-based service learning guided research project and, second, to advance student learning through direct contact with community activists in an Explore Chicago course. Each course represents a different model of community engagement: the community-based service learning course could be described as inside-out, as the resources and expertise of the academy are brought off-campus and into the community to address community-raised concerns, in this case, questions by members of a community organization, the Pilsen Alliance, to help them understand the urban policies and practices that were restructuring and transforming the city and the neighborhoods in which they live. The second example from my Explore Chicago freshman course is outside-in, namely

bringing activists into conversation with students who learn about the local community directly from those who live and work within it.

1. Community-based service learning

In 2003-04, with support from DePaul University's Steans Center for Community-based Service Learning, I entered an on-going partnership with the Pilsen Alliance, a nonprofit community organization that works in Chicago's primarily Latinx Lower West Side community. Based around an annual urban development course that integrated community-based service learning, this collaboration has led to both my students and myself making community presentations, attending community meetings, disseminating research findings through local galleries and self-published booklets, and engaging in community and city-wide discussions about affordable housing in a rapidly gentrifying area of Chicago (Hague, 2006; Curran, *et al.*, 2007; Hague *et al.* 2008; C.Hague *et al.*, 2011; Block, *et al.* 2018). Over the past fifteen years, this course has been reshaped, updated, and redesigned, but at its heart remain the relationships that my colleagues and I have built with the Pilsen Alliance community organization and the research that we have generated and shared with the community.

The Chicago neighborhood of Pilsen dates to the second half of the nineteenth century when it developed rapidly to house an immigrant population arriving primarily from Central and Eastern Europe. This population gave the neighborhood its name, Pilsen, derived from the Czech city of Plzeň. A center of labor activism, perhaps most famously the 1886 McCormick Reaper Works and 1910-11 garment workers strikes, Pilsen's population peaked at 85,680 in 1920 (Betancur & Kim, 2016). In the post-World War II era, Pilsen experienced a demographic change that echoed those seen in numerous U.S. cities as the white ethnic population moved to the suburbs and a new immigrant population began to arrive from Central and South America. By 1970, Pilsen was the first Latinx majority community area in Chicago (Betancur, 2005). Gentrification has since been transforming the neighborhood, in a manner that epitomizes the term as defined by its originator, Ruth Glass (1964, xviii):

One by one, many of the working class quarters of London have been invaded by the middle classes... Once this process of 'gentrification' starts in a district it goes on rapidly until all or most of the original working class occupiers are displaced and the whole social character of the district is changed.

In the 2000 Census, Pilsen's population was 44,031, 88.9% Hispanic, "with a \$27,763 median household income compared to Chicago's \$38,625" (Betancur, 2005: 62). By 2010 the median household income had risen to \$35,611 (still below Chicago's \$47,270) and, as the Latinx population decreased, property values rose (Betancur & Kim, 2016). By 2013, Betancur & Kim (2016) demonstrate, Pilsen's population had declined to 35,353 and 81.6% Hispanic.

It is in this context that my undergraduate urban geography course conducts a building inventory survey, which focuses on around 25 city blocks, approximately 850 properties, in the most rapidly gentrifying eastern areas of the neighborhood. In our preparatory and ongoing conversations with the Pilsen Alliance, we learned that the community organizers and local residents were very capable of telling the community's history and the stories of the impacts of gentrification that have made housing less affordable; where they needed support was in quantitative analyses and data visualizations that could display how their community was transforming in a manner that local officials would take more seriously than stories. As a result, we devised a project in which students annually collect data on a host of urban development indicators including zoning laws, property taxes, property sales and tax increment financing (TIF), the latter a "geographical approach to land use planning and development" that redistributes property taxes raised within a designated area to fund projects within that area and leverage additional private investment (Hague *et al.*, 2017, p.3).

The course uses lectures, field trips, seminar discussions, and data analysis. Student learning occurs in three different locations: the classroom, a computer laboratory, and the Pilsen neighborhood. In lectures, I outline Pilsen's geography and history, and explore theories of gentrification, illustrating these with documentary films, PowerPoint presentations, and guest speakers. Required readings include seminal peer-reviewed geography articles on gentrification, such as Smith (1979) and Hackworth and Smith (2001), and shorter essays from newspapers and magazines, such as Lutton's (1998) overview of the neighborhood, and Avila's (2005) account of the controversial conversion of a building from a light manufacturing facility to condominiums. This reading assignment strategy enables students to grasp the complex information presented in scholarly articles and relate it to Chicago-area examples of similar urban processes. Students prepare questions and discussion notes based on these readings which are used in classroom group work, enabling peer-explanation and further review of the material. In field trips to Pilsen, I highlight recent disputes over, and locations of, condominium development, housing demolitions, and community protests.

Each student is allocated around thirty-five properties, approximately one block, of Pilsen to explore. Students visit their blocks, assessing the structural qualities of the properties and their current uses, and I show them how to collect publicly available data from City of Chicago, the Cook County Assessor, and the Cook County Treasurer websites. After completing this empirical research, students compile their data into an Excel file and, with my guidance, produce graphs and charts to illustrate a final report about housing development in Pilsen. The student reports are graded for course credit and are then shared with the Pilsen Alliance. Students have told me that the methods of data collection and analytical techniques I introduce help them pursue careers in urban planning, real estate, and community organizing. Further, students feel ownership of the data and expertise in relation to their block: many have said that the course was one of the most important of their undergraduate career.

One of the things that I wanted to achieve in this course was to see service learning as research-driven community engagement in which the production of knowledge is shared, with both the resources of and expertise from within the academy assisting the community organization. Consequently, the life of this course does not stop at the end of the academic quarter. Throughout the year, I employ students to collate the information produced in the course into a single combined database. Diagrams and information from this data set are supplied to the Pilsen Alliance on demand. I supervise undergraduate students skilled in geographic information systems (GIS) to work with the combined data set to map answers to questions pertinent to the Pilsen Alliance, such as where zoning changes have been granted in the previous twelve months or which properties that used to be owned by individuals are now owned by banks or LLCs, both situations that are often precursors to redevelopment, or where property values and tax assessments are increasing most rapidly (Figure 1). The community organization uses the information derived from the course for their campaigns to challenge the city's various development scenarios for Pilsen, to aid local residents in securing property tax relief, and to coordinate community conversations on the process of gentrification and its impact on Pilsen. Upon request of the Pilsen Alliance, I have offered seminars and public lectures about the course's research findings and about urban policies such as zoning and historic preservation, presented testimony at City Council meetings about neighborhood development, and have spoken about gentrification and community development to both English and Spanish-language local radio, television, and newspapers.

2. Engaging Community Organizers and Activists

In 2015 I began a co-teaching partnership with Michael James, a well-known Chicago activist and community organizer. James attended graduate school at University of California, Berkeley, leaving in the mid-1960s to work for the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP) seeking to advance “an inter-racial movement of the poor” with Jobs Or Income Now (JOIN) in Chicago's Uptown neighborhood (James, 2013 [2006]; Gitlin & Hollander, 1971; Pekar & McClinton, 2008; Rothstein, 1969). James was a participant in the 1968 Democratic Convention protests, appearing on a PBS *History Detectives* episode that examined a protest poster he produced. He subsequently became one of the founders of *Rising Up Angry* (1969-75), a newspaper that expanded to become an organization that also led ‘serve the people programs’ like free health clinics, free legal services, and a host of similar services (De Zutter, 1989; Hague, 2008; Sonnie & Tracy, 2011; Tucker & Romero, 2016). James is also known locally for operating the Heartland Café (1976-2012) and its associated radio show, *Live from the Heartland*. Working alongside James, we developed a course entitled “Activists and Activism in Chicago Since 1960” that introduces around fifty freshman students each fall to community organizers and other people who have dedicated themselves to tackling the challenges facing neighborhoods in Chicago.

In this course, the syllabus is structured in a manner that pushes students to understand 1960s activism and its legacy through meeting people who have led activist lives and worked in community organizing. This intertwining of biography and local politics resonates strongly with students who see their own passions reflected in the comments of the speakers. Students are asked to make connections to today's issues and practices of community activism, and reflect on how much social progress has been made over the past fifty years. The interactions with community members take place both on and off campus. Indeed, my own role is primarily as coordinator and administrator: it is our guests that do the teaching. Whenever possible, we ask activists where we should meet in their community, and take the students to them. Thus, we put the places of activism into conversation with the activists themselves. Subsequent assignments ask students describe and reflect both on the comments of the guest, and the neighborhood that they traveled to and experienced. At other times, we invite speakers to join us in the classroom to tell students their activist biographies. Further, James and I take students to visit sites associated with his own activism, such as the John A. Logan statue in Grant Park, where the whole world was watching the clashes between police and protestors at the Democratic National Convention in August 1968, and Holy Covenant United Methodist Church which housed *Rising Up Angry's* Fritzi Englestein Free People's Health Clinic in the 1970s.

Many urban universities have provoked community protest with the processes of campus redevelopment and resultant residential displacement, roles that institutions are slow to admit to and slower to atone for, and about which current students are typically unaware. To highlight this, another regular guest is José 'Cha-Cha' Jiménez, who in the 1960s founded and led the Puerto Rican activists of the Young Lords Organization (Mathewes, 2019). Under his leadership, in May 1969 local Puerto Rican residents threatened by urban renewal occupied McCormick Seminary Building, now part of DePaul's campus, temporarily renaming it the Manuel Ramos Building. Hearing Jiménez describe events to students as they sit on the building's steps is a powerful learning experience, one that I suggest resonates strongly because the teaching is happening in place. A second on-campus site is a cafeteria, the Pit, that was blockaded and occupied in 1969 by African-American students and the Young Lords Organization, as a contemporary student journalist described:

Cha Cha Jiminez [sic], leader of the Young Lords, ...stood in front of the S.A.C. [Schmitt Academic Center] to reportedly protect the black students inside from the white students outside. Cha Cha then walked into the Pit and raised his right hand in a clenched fist, a symbol of black power (Schneider, 1969).

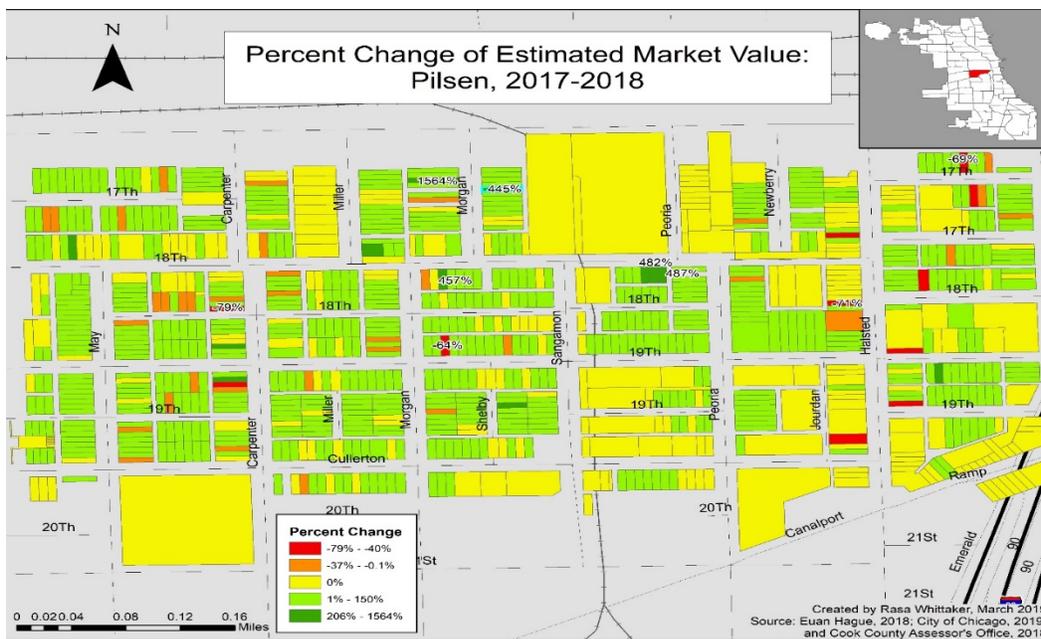
Meeting people at locations, in neighborhoods that have much changed in the past fifty years, gives students an opportunity to think about the issues which animate our speakers, such as civil rights, gentrification, community development, policing, and the impacts of societal change. Students are asked to reflect on other places, such as the anonymous apartments used by Jane to provide illegal abortion services across Chicago in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Booth and

Booth, 2008; King, 1993; Kaplan, 1997), and consider how community organizers operating out of storefronts and church basements led effective actions, as many similar organizations in Chicago continue to do. Such a course envisions community engagement in a manner that understands residents as educators, sharing their knowledge of the places in which our students live.

Conclusion

There are opportunities for community engagement on all our campuses; there are community members who can share their stories with our students and we have the expertise to pursue a radical professionalism at our institutions, practicing a pedagogy that can integrate faculty, students, and community residents in learning experiences. Indeed, one of the most heartening developments in during my twenty-year academic career has been that community engagement, and the practice of faculty and students collaborating with off-campus organizations, is increasingly common and increasingly perceived as best practice. Yet, I would suggest, it is still radical. Research-centered community engagement that generates knowledge that can be used to advance community goals and inform residents, that can strive to address and redress society's injustices and its uneven distribution of resources, and teaching that can engender change and make a difference, must be a central commitment of urban universities in the 21st century.

Figure 1. Percentage Change from 2017 to 2018 of Estimated Market Value by Property in Eastern Pilsen, Chicago. Properties with high decreases in value in this area are often vacant sites where houses have been demolished prior to new construction. The highest increases (over 450%) are typically newly constructed buildings. Map by Rasa Whittaker.



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