

Knowledge as Practice and the Search for Neighborhood-Based Solutions in the Buildings-Landscapes-Cultures Field School

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Abstract

Exploring what it means to live, work, and socialize within local Milwaukee neighborhoods, the Buildings-Landscapes-Cultures (BLC) Field School program takes students out of the classroom and into real-world learning environments. Over the course of three summers, the BLC Field School interviews, charts, documents, and synthesizes local historical data, oral histories, and current trends in a specific Milwaukee neighborhood. Beginning in 2014, the BLC Field School began to investigate the multicultural neighborhood of Washington Park, Milwaukee. While asked to document, the Field School participants are also asked to construct potential resolutions to neighborhood-based social issues. These social issues are defined as wicked problems, with potential resolutions relying necessarily on the understanding of the problem itself. Thus problem understanding and problem resolution occur as pieces of the larger learning experience. Henri Lefebvre's conceptualization of social space and social constructivism places the Washington Park neighborhood as a central component in the fieldwork of the program, and requires critical analysis of space and place within communities. Through active immersion and practice as forms of knowledge, students are able to look beyond narrow definitions of community and neighborhoods and instead point to complexities present when attempting to analyze fluid social realities. Using five interviews as reflective evidence for learning gains from the BLC Field School, framing of knowledge and learning as practice consistently emerges. Rather than self-reflective metacognitive activities, knowledge formed through and by practice links individuals into larger knowledge networks. These larger networks of student collaborators, community members, and organizational groups share knowledge in the hopes of creating long-lasting and effective resolutions to some of the Washington Park neighborhood's wicked problems.

Keywords: Knowledge as practice, immersive learning, social issues

1. Introduction

The Buildings-Landscapes-Cultures (BLC) Field School offers students an unconventional mode of learning through immersion in the everyday life of a local neighborhood. The 2014 BLC Field School program took place in the historic neighborhood of Washington Park, Milwaukee. It is a college-level field program that is open to undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM) looking to fulfill degree requirements. Occasionally, students visit from other universities or are members of the community hosting the program. Yet, primarily, students come from UWM disciplines such as architecture, urban studies, social work, and history. A variety of guest teachers from multiple disciplines, often the same as the disciplines of the students themselves, guide student teams in conducting architectural analysis, oral history interviews, and archival research. Each year, the Field School partners with a different nonprofit located in the neighborhood to bolster the integrative approach that this program takes. The immersion of students in the neighborhood's history and current reality gives students a unique perspective

on the realities of everyday life within the neighborhood. Complex social issues, or what social theorist Horst Rittel calls “wicked problems,”¹ present in Washington Park challenge students to co-create “resolutions”² in partnership with neighborhood residents. Working in tandem, the BLC Field School students and neighborhood partners seek to give a voice to this Milwaukee neighborhood.

In the work done by the BLC Field School students, the social and cognitive theories of *the social construction of space, knowledge as practice, and immersive learning* intersect and give the potential for discourse around and about the Washington Park community’s “wicked problems.” These problems, such as widespread poverty and a high crime rate, are made visible through this immersive learning project, though sometimes the theoretical backdrops are unrecognized due to the embedded and interrelated nature of wicked problems and social spaces. This project stems from a previously unclear understanding of how students managed their own learning gains in light of the complex and interwoven nature of the Field School experience, and initially began as an inquiry into how students used metacognition or other mental practices to negotiate wicked problems and construct adequate responses to the daily life of the Washington Park neighborhood. As students talk about their experiences in the BLC Field School project, their lack of extensive reflection points to an absence of metacognitive activities. Instead, knowledge formed through and by practice leads students to grapple with wicked problems.

2. Social Space

For the purpose of this research, I operate within the framework of space as defined by Lefebvre’s statement that “(Social) space is a (social) product.”³ The notion of space as a social product is a necessary underpinning to the concept of a neighborhood and community. Lefebvre complicates the traditional and sterile definitions of space and moves the idea of space away from being “a void packed like a parcel with various contents”⁴ and into a conceptualization of space as “social character”⁵ that is an active member in any relationship.

Lefebvre both rejects the division of space into discipline-specific spaces and performs his own divisions. Lefebvre splits space into three overlapping and mutually constructing categories of perceived spaces, conceived spaces, and lived spaces which “sit in dialectical relationship to one another”⁶ and deny complete separation from each other. Each form of space creates the other categories and thus also supports itself; no form of space can exist independent of each other. Space is thus real, imagined, and lived simultaneously.

Lefebvre’s use of the “triadic dialectic”⁷ of space gives new life to notions of social space. It is precisely due to Lefebvre’s overlapping and co-constructing spaces that the “complexities of social reality”⁸ are able to be explored. The concept of a neighborhood as a social space comes alive in the context of Lefebvre’s characterization of space as an active agent operating upon and with other social actors.

A neighborhood as a place (let it be noted that for the purposes of this paper I use space and place interchangeably, though the two can be considered distinct concepts⁹) that is not a “passive locus of social relations”¹⁰ but an active agent necessarily changes how we view the social reality of that neighborhood. Introducing another active social agent not only complicates the preexisting relations within the community residents, but also adds the relationship of the residents with the neighborhood itself to the social network present.

3. Wicked Problems

Writing on the issues of social problem-solving and systems, Horst Rittel tackles the considerable issue of professionalization in public service and planning. He posits that the professional “was hired to eliminate those conditions that predominant opinion judged undesirable” and that the “accomplishments of the past century” are testimony to the triumph of “professional prowess.”¹¹ However, Rittel makes it clear that he does not categorically condone the actions of professionalized public servants. Rather, he strives to deconstruct the cycle of professionalization and structural inadequacies of “goal-formation, problem-definition, and equity issues”¹² that have, in the face of a pluralized society, led to “public protests”¹³ against prescribed and top-down “solutions.”

Rittel’s end goal is not to critique the professional, but rather to explore the nature of societal problems and the systems in which these problems operate. Rittel urges us to consider not “what are [the systems] made of?” but rather “what do the systems do?” and “what *should* these systems do?”¹⁴ in terms of resolving social issues (e.g. poverty). Though he remains vague on what precisely those systems are, it is understood that they are social in nature, and

complex to operate with or in due to their open nature. Rather than a closed circuit, such as a mathematical problem, social problems have no closing strand, instead having many strands that connect to other social problems.

Rittel then moves to consider the ethics of systematic planning and resolutions by noting that “even if we do happen to know what aims we seek” the “*where* and *how*” of planning remains ambiguous.¹⁵ Noting that “many parties are equally equipped, interested, and/or entitled to judge the solutions”¹⁶ Rittel comes to the crux of his argument: that social problems (“wicked problems”) have no simple map of those involved and of possible resolutions.¹⁷ He notes that all problems are interconnected and construct one another.

What this tells us about social networks within neighborhoods is that, whatever conditions present or absent in that neighborhood, the improvement on or betterment of the community is multi-faceted and operates in an open system. No resolution ends the problem definitively, and no problem truly disappears. Looking at the issues of neighborhood improvement and sustainability, Rittel argues that “the aim is not to find the truth, but to improve some characteristics of the world where people live.”¹⁸ Here he reminds us of the humanistic work done by planners—those same professionals who might use prescribed resolutions to another’s issues.

4. Knowledge As Practice

Yet another framework is the notion of knowledge as practice. Scholars Edward Weber and Anne Khademian couch their definitions of knowledge in terms of sending, receiving, and integrating.¹⁹ They note that in “wicked problem-based network settings” the individuals involved are highly diverse, thus “the information flowing through the network is likely to have different meanings, different uses, and different values for the individuals and groups receiving and using it.”²⁰ The complexities of knowledge present within a social network further complicates the search for social realities and resolutions within a neighborhood.

Weber and Khademian focus their definitions of knowledge not as “a thing or object that can be captured, stored, transferred, and managed”²¹ but as individualized and situated action “deeply embedded in what they practice.”²² From this, Weber and Khademian assert that “knowledge must be understood in the context of practice that is situated in a geographic setting, a particular point in time, or within a particular set of relationships.”²³ This specific definition of knowledge is highly applicable to the work of the BLC Field School within the Washington Park neighborhood.

Any other approach to knowledge “may be sufficient...if there is an understanding of the kind of knowledge that is required for a particular task.”²⁴ The assumption of prior understanding and problem definition links back to the challenges that Horst Rittel outlined when dealing with wicked problems versus tame problems. Rittel writes, “The information needed to *understand* the problem depends upon one’s idea for *solving* it.”²⁵ The approach of knowledge as practice instead of as an object is therefore necessary to conceptualizations of wicked problems, which have no set of simple information necessary to solve it. Knowledge as practice acknowledges the difficulties of dealing with wicked problems, and also heightens awareness of individual knowledge practices. Tame problems, as according to Rittel’s differentiation, are not inherently social nor multidirectional—hence other frameworks of knowledge are sufficient for conceptualizing and solving tame problems.

5. Interviews

For the remainder of this paper, I will use interviews of three first-year Field School participants to examine the content for evidence of knowledge formed through immersion. In addition, I use the interview of a second-year participant and teaching assistant for the Field School and the interview of a non-participant who nevertheless analyzed the Field School data in terms of public and private spatial uses. These primary sources give practical context to the theoretical frameworks examined above.

The methodology of the interviews was an informal take on interviewing. Interviews were loosely structured with a series of basic prompting questions. The questions focused on the experience of the Field School and stories concerning the experience. Students were chosen from a larger list that included all students from the summer’s program that were still known to be in the Milwaukee area. This list was further narrowed to the final five participants after all were originally reached out to, and only these five were interested in pursuing this project further. The length of interviews ranged from fifteen minutes to forty-five minutes and often ended as more of a conversation. After conducting interviews, I conceptually sorted the qualitative data and performed content analysis. While no formal coding occurred, constant comparison internally and across interviews provided a loose set of codes or themes by which I organized content.

Analysis of five Field School interviews shows that while students participated in and engaged with several forms of learning, they were not always readily aware of their own learning gains. Unconsciousness of learning gains points to a preoccupation with other activities. As “Michael”²⁶ notes, “this is the most exhausting class.”²⁷ His preoccupation with the stress and busyness of the class overshadows his ability to recognize that his cognitive conception of a neighborhood was being challenged. While he repeatedly mentions the stress of the class, he mentions only once, and with prompting, that “the most substantial thing that happened for me was...it really changed my view about how things work...both in say a neighborhood and in a community.”²⁸

“Gabriel” understood his own learning gains in terms of practice. When asked about the labelling of the Field School, he answered that “a large part of it was ethnographic. You go and you ask and you observe, but in the end you take it and analyze it. You do something with it.”²⁹ His open acknowledgment of his learning gains as something that he “did something with” points to his conceptualization of knowledge as practice. Gabriel also acknowledged the presence of wicked problems in his own work. While he notes that “I can’t say we witnessed [poverty], we just saw something that might look like it,” he also states that “there are structural problems that are much larger than neighborhood-based”³⁰ issues of poverty. Thus Gabriel was reflective and deeply critical on his own primary research in Washington Park.

As to be expected, the non-participant interviewee, “Josh,” revealed very little explicit learning in terms of immersion. The separation between his applied research and the direct involvement of the Field School creates a barrier that is difficult to bridge. Yet Josh does reveal some implicit understanding of learning goals and gains. He states, “I kind of understood why the Field School would want to look at that area of Milwaukee,”³¹ yet goes no further into the why of his own research. He likewise does not speculate on the motives of the Field School’s research, thus pointing to either a lack of certainty, or ambivalence towards these higher-order cognitive questions. He appears to dance around the heart of his own research precisely because it deals with research on other research. The two layers of research from the primary source—that is, from Washington Park—here clouds the active agent’s ability to see his own learning gains.

Similar to Josh, “Tiffany” treated much of her learning as implicit rather than explicit. However, Tiffany did frame her learning as practice. When asked about how she would describe the Field School experience, she answered in terms of learning and activities. She answered the question with the statement: “We learned how to take interviews with people...documentation and photography.”³² So while Tiffany remained concrete in her conscious learning, she did see the link between practice and knowledge.

The interview with the second-year Field School participant contained more reflexive statements and increased cognitive awareness of knowledge practices. The increased cognitive reflection is most likely due to the dual roles the interviewee had been in, as both a participant and a teaching assistant. Her succinct description of the Field School points to a deep consciousness on what her own learning goals were. She described the Field School as:

An exercise in holistic preservation and applying that to Milwaukee neighborhoods. Specifically Washington Park and collecting information about the history, the change, the people, and the stories, and finally the goal is weaving a deeper narrative than could be collected through blueprints to ultimately empower the neighbors.³³

This prepared and polished description speaks to two points: that “Marie” has both answered the question “what is the Field School?” before and that she has reflected enough to phrase this answer in satisfactory terms. Her own description of the Field School also points to what she considers most relevant. By phrasing the description in her own words, Marie points to her own interests within the context of the Field School.

6. Metacognition

In the search for metacognitive activities present in the interviews of the five student researchers little was explicitly found. A theoretical understanding of metacognition garnered from Jennifer Livingston’s “Metacognition: An Overview” posits that metacognition “involves overseeing whether a cognitive goal has been met.”³⁴ While the limitations posed by the structure and questions of the interviews clearly prevented certain information from becoming evident, the overall impressions left by these interviews is that metacognitive activities do not drive the search for resolutions in the Washington Park neighborhood. Rather, knowledge emerging from practice in that specific social space produces a host of potential resolutions to site-specific wicked problems. Utilizing these theoretical concepts as embedded frameworks in the Field School provides an opportunity for students to come to terms with real-world

wicked problems in a way that cannot be replicated in a traditional college class. Internal self-awareness of students' own mental practices in the overlapping theories and lived reality of this program demonstrates that students continually see their experiences as action-driven rather than meta-reflective or entirely cerebral.

7. Moving Forward

Further research must be done to refine and carry on this work, as the Field School is a continual and active agent. The search for resolutions to social issues must also continue as, according to Rittel, "wicked problems have no stopping rule."³⁵ Other areas of scholarship that may intersect with the work of the BLC Field School are Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's "Communities of Practice,"³⁶ and Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*.³⁷ Incorporating these works or similar analyses will help shape curriculum for future program years, much as gathering and investigating the students themselves helps shape the curricula of later years.

The scope of the BLC Field School is a three-year endeavor to experience and learn in the context of a Milwaukee neighborhood. The summer of 2014 was the first year in the Washington Park neighborhood. In order to record and provide a forum for the stories and the social reality of Washington Park residents, participants in the BLC Field School are responsible for generating new knowledge via collective practice of preexisting and individualized knowledge. While the goals of the Field School are advocacy and support, the notion that knowledge is practice allows for participant's own growth to occur in tandem with the outreach done in the Washington Park neighborhood.

Co-construction of resolutions to issues faced in the neighborhood points to direct applications of knowledge. The site-specific responses to the neighborhood likewise reveals the importance of acknowledging the neighborhood space as a unique and active member in the search for resolutions. In the years to come, the BLC Field School will need to continue to incorporate spatiality as an active agent in the learning and creation processes. However, it is important to note that while the direct goals of the BLC Field School are to record and communicate the stories of Washington Park, the indirect goals are to find resolutions to social issues and wicked problems. Knowledge produced in the practice of this Field School will enable participants and partners alike to create resolutions to important social issues impacting populations beyond those of just Washington Park.

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9. References

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