Alinsky's Reveille: A Community-Organizing Model for Neighborhood-Based Literacy Projects

Eli Goldblatt

Who serves whom in community-based composition courses? Our field has taken a well-meaning and enthusiastic interest in this combination of writing instruction and service-learning over the last few years. Studies in the mid- to late nineties described courses and institutional arrangements and began to explore the ramifications for composition and English studies (Schutz and Gere; Herzberg; Peck, Flower, and Higgins). Linda Adler-Kassner and her colleagues edited an influential volume in 1997 that signaled the arrival of this new approach as a major pedagogical movement, and in 2000 Tom Deans's *Writing Partnerships* gave us a basic framework for thinking about the cooperative relationship between students and the organizations they encounter in these courses. More recent work has focused on how community-based learning can be sustained over time through faculty research (Cushman), how to address the gap between community and academic discourses (Chaden, Graves, Jolliffe, and Vandenberg), and what contradictions we must struggle with in intercultural inquiry (Flower), each study highlighting strategies for respecting the needs and abilities of participating community partners. In a crucial step toward establishing the institutional structures necessary for sustained partnership, Jeffrey T. Grabill and Lynée Lewis Gaillet have urged us to focus on the interface between writing programs and community partners. The need for a balanced and nonexploitive relationship in community-based learning asserts itself insistently in our discussions of this approach, and clearly at this stage writing program administrators must become much more active in developing institutional models that promise true mutual benefits for postsecondary schools and their off-campus partners.

Eli Goldblatt is associate professor of English and university writing director at Temple University. He teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in composition and literacy studies as well as undergraduate creative writing. This essay is drawn from a book project entitled *Because We Live Here: Reconceiving Writing beyond the Curriculum.*

Because the literature is heavily oriented toward student- and faculty-based outreach into underserved communities, we seldom hear of community-based learning projects initiated by community partners themselves. The Community Literacy Center in Pittsburgh may be one exception (see Peck, Flower, and Higgins), but even that landmark partnership arose as much out of the social commitments of faculty at Carnegie Mellon University as out of the community's needs articulated by their Settlement House collaborators. The fact is that universities and colleges seldom develop plans based on suggestions that originate off-campus. Faculty and students devise projects based on research into local citizens' needs or approach recreation centers and libraries to house tutoring projects or screening programs. Neighborhood centers with no official link to a university are less likely on their own to take the steps necessary to bring a cooperative project with a university into being: contacting the right academic units; working with faculty to develop a plan the center's board would approve; and carrying forward the project using university personnel, facilities, and resources.

Neighborhood centers often have energetic and creative people on staff, but they usually face high demand for services, few resources, limited training of support staff, and no time to develop projects with partners in an entirely different work culture like a university. Academics get tenured and promoted for asking questions and proposing interpretations, for publishing and teaching. By publishing this article on community-university partnerships and teaching community-based courses, for example, I add lines to my vita and earn points in the economy of my college and profession. In contrast, directors of neighborhood centers must produce programs and services for their constituents with minimal expense and little room for experimentation, keeping one eye on their boards and the other on funding sources at all times. Manuel Portillo, the neighborhood center director I describe in this article, gains no tangible advantage in his organizing world for appearing in a learned publication; he still cannot get health benefits from the board of his small nonprofit organization until he brings in sufficient grant money in the next fiscal year.

This difference of time and emphasis stacks the cards toward university-initiated projects that are research-driven and aimed at providing undergraduate and graduate students community-based experiences. As academics passionately interested in literacy—and professionals invested in literacy as the medium of our own careers—we see reading and writing as the heart of our involvement with communities. But organizers see literacy as one of many issues they must address with their constituencies, and the people who attend adult basic-education programs or welfare-to-work projects see literacy as one of many needs in their lives along with health care, housing, food, child care, and employment. Is there a way that neighborhood centers themselves could pursue agendas that universities would respond to on terms dictated by the neighborhoods? Can writing programs in particular

foster such arrangements? Could a different model of research and outreach support community-based agendas?

To formulate a new model of university-community connections based more in the latter's reality, we might focus on a theory of action devised for neighborhoods rather than for higher education. Educators tend to imagine their work with students within a traditional pattern—let's call it the "throughput" model. We move students along a path marked by diplomas and certificates, occupy them with reading and writing tasks, determine their achievements with tests or papers. Above all, throughput requires that we keep them at desks and tables, in libraries or at computer workstations, with the occasional field trip or lab to indicate that the learning they do has application in a world outside school. After four or five years of this, they graduate and move on to jobs or further study. Even most community-based learning courses follow this model; they simply substitute engagement with genuine outside learners for the texts that might otherwise represent the outside world. Ellen Cushman notes the prevalence of what she calls the "end-of-the-semester project model of service learning" (59), a model that allows courses with significant off-campus experience to approximate the shape and policy of classroom-based courses. As Cushman is careful to emphasize, this model is by no means wrong or inappropriate, but the traditional approach may not be the most suited for the needs of adult learners in a neighborhood literacy center or children in an after-school program. They need teachers who are not just passing through and programs that do not appear one year and evaporate the next. They need literacy programs that take into account the array of demands on a stressed community. Most of all, they need tutors who see individual learners as whole people and university partners sensitive to the entire missions of local agencies, not just researchers studying subjects in sites or educators supervising students in field placements.

Saul Alinsky: A Community-Organizing Model

Let us consider what a community-based model might look like if founded on principles derived from the work of Saul Alinsky, the influential community organizer whose career spanned the period from the 1930s through the 1960s. Longtime organizer and activist Heather Booth has said, "Alinsky is to community organizing as Freud is to psychoanalysis" (qtd. in Slayton 198). His work can serve as a lens for reorienting our vision, shifting the setting for our model building from the campus to the streets.

Alinsky was not an educator, if by that we mean a person concerned with schools and schooling, but he cared a great deal about how ordinary people learn to act for their own good and the good of their neighbors. Like the work of two other theorists who have had a tremendous impact on the field of composition/rhetoric—John

Dewey and Paulo Freire—Alinsky's writing is highly suggestive about ways to get students to work together on common projects and take responsibility for their own educational process. Unlike Dewey, however, Alinsky was mainly concerned with organizing disenfranchised people so that they could exercise more political power (or, as Charles Silberman has put it, so that "banding together will give them the capacity to alter the circumstances of their lives" [335]). Unlike Freire, Alinsky said little directly about literacy and more about strikes, actions, and alliances that would shake the established powers from their exploitive and paternalistic habits. Unlike both Dewey and Freire, Alinsky was more a fighter than a writer in his career; his two books on organizing are polemical, sometimes to the point of being obnoxious. Yet Alinsky's commitment to empowering people has much in common with these two better-known twentieth-century figures, and his faith in the democratic process resonates with an abiding faith in our field that access to disciplinary knowledge and authority comes through support for students' composing processes.

Saul Alinsky was born in 1909 to immigrant Russian Jewish parents living in a small flat in a three-story tenement on the Near West Side of Chicago. His family wasn't destitute—his father owned a small garment sweatshop in the building where they then lived—but Alinsky grew up in a tough neighborhood where gangs of Jewish kids fought against Polish kids in the bordering slum (see Finks or Horwitt for this and much of the following biographical information). He attended the University of Chicago, studying archaeology and sociology as an undergraduate and graduating in 1930. He continued in Chicago's sociology department for graduate work in criminology, but, partly because of financial pressures and partly because of his own temperament, he left academic studies to work full-time in the field. By the time he had reached his late twenties, Alinsky had developed a tough but open and effective intellectual style of working with a wide range of people. He had accrued some reputation as a promising young criminologist, and in 1938 he was offered a lucrative job running the Probation and Parole Board in Philadelphia and teaching at the University of Pennsylvania. He decided, however, to forgo the temptations of secure government and academic employment in order to organize on the streets of Chicago (Finks 12–13; Sanders, "Professional [. . .] Part 2" 44–45).

Alinsky's talents as a community organizer began to emerge when Clifford Shaw sent him in 1938 to a neighborhood on Chicago's West Side called Back of the Yards. Alinsky's biographer Sanford Horwitt describes this place "as perhaps the nadir of industrial slum life," an immigrant neighborhood putrid with the stench of meatpacking houses and stockyards (57); thirty years before, Upton Sinclair had written scathingly about this same neighborhood in *The Jungle*. Alinsky himself said that Back of the Yards "was not the slum across the tracks. This was the slum across the tracks from across the tracks" (Sanders, "Professional [. . .] Part 2" 45). Organizing in the Back of the Yards was a daunting task. On top of the poverty and political

powerlessness of the area, the warring factions and the relative neutrality of the Roman Catholic Church—the dominant social organization in the area—made the prospects look dim from the start (Horwitt 55).

Alinsky began organizing as he had been trained to do in other neighborhoods: hang around and get to know the people and resources in the area. In an earlier study of Chicago's "Little Italy," Alinsky had developed a technique for interviewing kids, and fifteen teenagers had written their life histories for researchers with his help (Finks 11; Horwitt 25). But in Back of the Yards, his job was to use his information to organize a juvenile recreation and counseling center under the auspices of Shaw's Chicago Area Project (CAP). What made CAP different from other settlement-house programs was that Shaw's approach emphasized "citizen participation." As Horwitt puts it, "When the people realized they could change local conditions, Shaw theorized, they would then feel more responsible for doing something about the problems that plagued them" (53). This required Alinsky to develop relationships with all the community's churches and other institutions, in the hopes of getting them to cooperate on CAP. Cooperative effort seemed impossible at first because—although the area was entirely white and Eastern European—the Poles, Slovaks, Bohemians, and Lithuanians traditionally did not get along with one another, and their respective churches showed no interest in meeting together, let alone joining hands to accomplish something for all the residents. But Alinsky developed a powerful working friendship with lifelong neighborhood resident and local park director Joseph Meegan, and together they formed the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council (BYNC) that succeeded in bringing the factions together to fight for the common good.

The BYNC proved a powerful model of what neighborhood organizations could do when they worked together. Developing close ties with labor leader John L. Lewis as well as progressive Catholic Bishop Bernard J. Sheil, Alinsky built a power base and a national reputation that made him both loved and loathed. Always using Chicago as his base, Alinsky in 1940 founded a national organization called the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) (Horwitt 91) and through IAF he or his few organizers led successful organizing efforts in South St. Paul, Los Angeles, Rochester, and Buffalo. With the help of future journalist Nicholas Von Hoffman and others, Alinsky organized the black neighborhood of Woodlawn in the South Side of Chicago. To be sure, they also failed rather spectacularly in New York City's Chelsea district and never made much headway on a project in Kansas City, Kansas. Alinsky's organization trained César Chávez, and Chávez later used Alinsky's techniques to organize California farm workers. Alinsky worked with Ivan Illich in the early 1950s when the young priest was first starting to be active with the Puerto Rican community in New York City.

Not only did his organizing activities touch many between 1938 and 1970, but also Alinsky's thought and writing influenced many in the field of urban politics and labor activism. The man *Harper's* called "the professional radical" deeply impressed the journalist and economist Charles Silberman, whose popular 1964 book, *Crisis in Black and White*, offers Alinsky's organizing approach as the main hope for solving the tensions in urban neighborhoods of the time. In addition to his best-selling book on organizing, *Reveille for Radicals*, and his reprise book for a new generation, *Rules for Radicals*, Alinsky also wrote a sympathetic portrait of his friend and mentor, CIO founder John L. Lewis. As *Time* magazine noted in 1970, "Like Machiavelli, whom he has studied and admires, Alinsky teaches how power may be used. Unlike Machiavelli, his pupil is not the prince but the people" ("Radical" 56). Alinsky was one of the outstanding radical, noncommunist figures on the left for over thirty years of the twentieth century.

Throughout his career, Alinsky was often regarded with disgust by the right, wariness by the left, and downright exasperation by many in between. In the sixties, the conservative *Christian Century* made a habit of attacking this man and his "bizarre, anti-Christian doctrines of power" ("Episcopal" 1452). Further to the right, in the late 1960s the Ku Klux Klan twice picketed his arrival at airports, and the FBI warned him of death threats from the reactionary militia called the Minute Men (Horwitt 539). On the liberal left, *The Nation* said in a 1946 review of *Reveille* that "in some parts of the world fascism has made use of exactly this sort of 'radical' talk," and *The New Republic* that year said that Alinsky's book "expresses a point of view which runs the risk of developing *away* from the democracy that the author speaks of with such fervor" (qtd. in Horwitt 183). For those further left, throughout his career "Alinsky's disavowal of a class analysis made him and the importance of his work suspect" (Horwitt xv). The last chapter of *Rules for Radicals*, in which he outlines a campaign to work with the middle class, has a whiff of compromise that New Left radicals must have found repugnant. Moderate critics found his famous dictum that organizers of the poor must "rub raw the sores of discontent" particularly objectionable ("Gadfly" 30).

No matter what audience he addressed, Alinsky was, as biographer P. David Finks remarks, "hard-nosed, outspoken, and profane; when he wanted to be, he could be loud, bullying, impatient, and scornful of questions he thought stupid or elementary" (266). Like many men of his generation, he was not particularly open to contributions to the work by women (Horwitt 289), and one comes to suspect that his notorious hostility to social work was at least in part a reaction to a profession that women had largely invented, especially in the Chicago of Jane Addams's Hull House settlement movement (see Horwitt 127). In his books Alinsky gleefully tells about manipulating and lying to individuals and groups (*Reveille* 106–28), shows

disdain for conventional ideas of morality (*Rules* 24–47), revels in conflict and battle with his enemy (*Reveille* 132–54), scorns liberals (*Reveille* 19–23), and takes great pride at being hated wherever he is called to organize (*Rules* 136). In short, he could be an irascible and ornery guy, even to his friends and family.

And yet there is a compelling sweetness to his vision. In *Reveille for Radicals* Alinsky defines a radical with reference to Revolutionary War–era democrats who "really liked people, loved people—all people. They were the human torches setting aflame the hearts of men so that they passionately fought for the rights of their fellow men, all men" (9). For him, a radical "places human rights far above property rights" (16) and—with an undistracted intelligence "not fooled by shibboleths or facades" (15)—fights both to achieve "economic welfare" and "freedom of the min[d]" for oppressed people (16). Alinsky was never a member of the Communist Party, and indeed resisted any program of principles that might override a more compelling philosophical consistency: "The radical is deeply interested in social planning but just as deeply suspicious of, and antagonistic to, any idea of plans that work from the top down. Democracy to him is working from the bottom up" (17). The straight-talking, blunt tone of Alinsky's prose can sometimes obscure the complexity of his social thought; he regarded the abilities to compromise and to develop relationships as crucial qualities in an organizer, just as he called for organizers to show courage and candor in the face of corporate threats.

A Set of Principles

From Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals* I have culled a set of principles for community organizing that also make sense for community-based learning approaches in rhetoric-composition. Those with experience in organizing may find these rules commonplace and even old-fashioned, but for the field and for those teachers and administrators anxious to develop ties with stressed neighborhoods and failing schools, Alinsky's principles can provide useful guidance. The list isn't exhaustive, but I think these principles can help us formulate a new model of university-community connection that is less focused on service and traditional notions of education and yet more effective in promoting productive learning for all involved.

1. Draw on the inevitability of class and group conflict as well as the unpredictability of events for your creativity to invent tactics that fit the moment (19).

2. Be guided by a broadly defined sense of self-interest, taking on multiple issues, and encourage all other participants to do the same (23, 53–59, 76).

3. Try to see every situation in as stark a light as possible, unblurred by ideological imperatives, traditional hatreds, or conventional moralities (12–15).

4. Communicate with others on their own ground, amassing personal experience and solid relationships among the people with whom you intend to work (70, 81–97).

5. Respect people's dignity by creating the conditions for them to be active participants in solving their own problems rather than victims or mere recipients of aid (123).

6. Shape educational experiences that matter in people's lives by helping individuals identify issues they can grasp and do something about (106, 119, 124).

7. Build the leadership capacity of the group being organized and take as the goal the independent functioning of that community (92, see also *Reveille* 64–75).

These seven principles frame learning in the context of doing. Dewey could have written some of these principles, and Freire could have written others. Yet the community organizer embodies a late-twentieth-century radicalism Dewey does not, and the Jew from multiethnic Chicago adds an American social context to pedagogy, as Freire could not. Thomas Deans has pointed out that Dewey emphasizes education as a means to achieve democratic unity to such an extent that "we hear little about race, ethnicity, and cultural difference in Dewey's writings" (35), and he remarks that though "both Dewey and Freire are progressive in their theories and practices [. . .] only Freire can be considered radical" (41). As radical as Freire's approach to literacy is—serving as the basis for literacy campaigns among the dispossessed of Brazil, Cuba, Nicaragua, and elsewhere in the developing world—in the United States Freire's thought has become so abstracted that his ideas often translate into little more than a preference for discussion over lecture in college classrooms. His contribution to American progressive educational theory is invaluable, but Freire did not design his literacy programs for the contradictions of education in American cities, where kids game on PlayStations in unheated apartments with peeling, lead-based paint and attend schools where state-of-the-art computers sit untouched because no one has the time or technical knowledge to set them up. Perhaps because Alinsky is not expressly an educational philosopher, his work provides a striking challenge to those of us who want to conceptualize the role of literacy education within the context of university-community relationships.

Kate Ronald and Hephzibah Roskelly have noted that "philosophical pragmatism"—as practiced by Freire, Dewey, and others—"makes experience and consequence integral to epistemology and inquiry" (620). Alinsky demonstrates this same restlessness to know and to try limits, but he takes his philosophy to the streets. Alinsky's goal is organizing first and foremost; even though education was an important part of his overall program, he was not especially concerned with schooling or literacy. He wanted to make lives better by bringing people together in a working organization so that they could change their own living conditions and gain dignity. As he puts it most succinctly, "Change comes from power, and power comes from organization. In order to act, people must get together" *(Rules* 113). Alinsky has a bite to him that Dewey and Freire no longer have after so many educators have borrowed from their work, applied their theories to practice, and argued their merits and limitations. Alinsky's principles are perhaps more difficult to domesticate

into a pedagogical approach, not because his language is arcane or his philosophy abstract but because his politics are consistently blunt and confrontational.

At the heart of Alinsky's approach to organizing is his concept of self-interest. To those who worry that self-interest as a motivational force would lead to individual greed and communal disintegration, he answers: "The fact is that self-interest can be a most potent weapon in the development of co-operation and identification of the group welfare as being of more importance than personal welfare" *(Reveille* 94). The proper function of the organizer, in Alinsky's view, is to identify problems that affect people individually but help them see these problems as issues they can do something about collectively *(Rules* 119). This requires from the organizer a view of daily life undistracted by the lure of fast money or political position and a faith that people will elaborate a program that will be good for all *(Reveille* 56).

Alinsky stresses that nothing can be accomplished without tremendous effort to build relationships with local leaders *(Reveille* 188), factions in a group *(Reveille* 125), and indeed anyone the organizer wants to work with or influence *(Rules* 93–94). However, he also urged his organizers to *disorganize* old and unproductive ways a community works (or doesn't work) in order to build a stronger, more participatory organization later *(Rules* 116). Alinsky organizers are agitators because they provoke conflict for the purpose of drawing people into action together: "The job then is to get the people to move, to act, to participate; in short to develop and harness the necessary power to effectively conflict with the prevailing patterns and change them" *(Rules* 117). Reading Alinsky now, years after his initial successes in the late 1930s as well as his revival during the radical 1960s, one can feel both the love and the hatred the man could inspire.

The picture Alinsky paints of the organizer clashes with the image most of us hold as proper for a teacher. In popular opinion, teachers shouldn't be overtly political, shouldn't manipulate their students, and shouldn't reach beyond the discipline or skill set they are hired to teach. In fact many of us would feel uncomfortable acting like Alinsky's organizers in the classroom. Yet we might wish to be more creative and responsive to the particular situations our students find themselves in, hope to build the leadership capacity of the communities we serve, and desire to communicate based on better knowledge of our students' lives and more respect for their dignity. I am not suggesting that we convert undergraduate tutors into young Alinsky agitators stirring up trouble in schoolyards and street corners. Nor do I urge professors to don leather jackets and give up their tenure to work in storefront literacy centers. Radical fantasies are appealing, but to rush off in that direction is to mistake Alinsky's style for his politics. To me Alinsky is calling for a deeper commitment to change than fantasy allows. He challenges us in postsecondary positions to think like organizers rather than academics when we devise models of university-community relationship.

As academics, even if we want to put neighborhood needs first, we cannot but start with the demands of our classrooms or the requirements for promotion. But what if we start from the activist's ground in this instance, learning before we act, developing relationships and commitments before we organize classes and set up research projects? When we have established these relationships, we may be able to help the community partners identify problems and transform these problems into issues to act upon, only later considering how students in courses fit in and what university resources could be helpful in addressing the issues. In short, what if we use our research, teaching, administrative, and writing abilities for the sake of the people our students tutor, not only for the sake of the college programs we run? What if the "throughput" model didn't dominate our program designs, but instead we followed a model of long-term investment in the neighborhoods where we work and centers with which we form partnerships? This thinking leads to a model of community-based learning and research in which students and their teachers are not so much providing services as participating in a collective effort defined by academics and local citizens alike.

The Open Doors Collaborative

At Temple University in 1998 we started a component of the writing program called the Institute for the Study of Literature, Literacy, and Culture (see Parks and Goldblatt). The College of Liberal Arts supports the institute with a very small budget, a stipend for one graduate assistant, course reductions for the director, and, some years, reductions for a faculty fellow or two. Whatever other funding we need comes from grants. After about four years we gave the institute a simpler name for regular usage: New City Writing. The streamlining of the name reflects changes in the mission. New City Writing is still an academic unit in which scholars and students interested in the cultural formation of literature and literacy can pursue special projects, but our focus is on community-based writing and reading programs that lead to publications as well as educational ventures whereby schoolteachers, neighborhood people, and university-related people can learn together. We have published a magazine called *Open City* that collected writing by homeless people, school kids, and local writers on subjects like food or shelter. We founded New City Press to publish book projects related to specific communities in the Philadelphia area, such as a series of interviews with residents of a historically integrated working-class South Philadelphia neighborhood called the Forgotten Bottom (Tarrier), a collection of essays by activist disabled people talking about their lives and campaigns (Ott), and a bilingual oral history of Mexican mushroom workers in a rural area west of the city (Lyons and Tarrier).

New City Writing works as a partner with local schools and neighborhood organizations. We develop projects with community arts organizations such as Art Sanctuary, serving primarily an African American population, and Asian Arts Initiatives, a group focused on Asians and Asian Americans in Chinatown as well as areas in the southern and western sections of the city. We place undergraduates and graduates from courses and with independent projects in various school and community sites, focusing especially on writing centers that can be developed and supported by the organizations involved but can serve as a settled location for visiting tutors and speakers. We participate in writing grant proposals with our partners, acting as the administering agents for some grants and providing resources and assistance for grants held by other groups. Always we try to respond creatively and cooperatively to needs articulated by neighborhood organizations, and we try to emphasize building institutions and leadership that will allow long-term relationships and trust to grow among partners.

As in the composition instruction paradigm shift led by Peter Elbow, Donald Murray, Nancy Sommers, and Sondra Perl during the 1970s, community-based learning and research has shifted focus from product to process because, as Alinsky would say, the democratic process is paramount. Not that the grant proposals we write and the projects we design aren't important—just as the final version of a student's paper matters much more than early process rhetoric admitted—but the unfolding effort to brainstorm ideas, draft proposals, revise our sense of what matters to us, and recommit ourselves to collaborative work leads us to stronger final projects than anything that any of the partners could have devised in our offices alone. Compositionists should recognize the logic of this approach; it is resonant both with the process movement and with the principles of community organizing articulated by Alinsky. Building capacity, forming relationships, communicating across institutional boundaries—these processes ultimately shape the nature of the solutions any community can design and support.

As an example of the way a project might be developed under Alinsky's model, I offer a brief account of Open Doors, a cooperative effort among directors of three adult-education centers in North Philadelphia and New City Writing. To me, Open Doors suggests a new model emerging at this stage of the community-based learning movement, one that comes from neighborhoods and draws on the university without being controlled by its demands. I entered into conversations with my partners on this project with few expectations and no particular goal except that I wanted to meet some people working at the nexus of ESL, technology, and literacy issues within small agencies in the North Philly community. After more than two years of meetings and listserv exchanges and grant applications, I hope that Open Doors will lead to a loose network of programs that can serve as a kind of alternative or preparatory community college. We see a need among people in the neighborhoods who have a

desire to try college and perhaps seek a degree but who need a transitional year or two before they enroll in traditional post-secondary education. I would not be surprised, however, if a year from now some other formation that my collaborators or I cannot yet imagine arises from our work.

In January 2002 I called on Manuel Portillo at his office next door to St. Ambrose Episcopal Church in a Latino neighborhood of North Philadelphia. The priest of the church, Father Carlos, had approached Temple's Community Partnerships Office to get ESL teachers from Temple for the church's new educational program, Proyecto sin Fronteras, which Manuel directs. Community Partnerships had arranged to have a few TESOL students work at Proyecto as a part of their graduate program in the previous year. My colleague Steve Parks had met Manuel at a Temple event, and he praised Manuel and his program. I had also heard of Manuel from an organizer who worked with him in another neighborhood, and I knew Manuel had a strong interest in educational programs that encourage greater civic participation in the community. I put aside everything else one afternoon and went to see him in the Proyecto office, a converted rowhouse in a portion of North Philly largely Latino but, unlike most of the Latino areas, not exclusively Puerto Rican. Manuel is a slender man in his mid-forties, a refugee from Guatemala who left at the height of the government war against dissenters in the mid-1980s. He is intense but a good listener. He had nearly finished a college degree in his country before being forced to flee and had studied social work in Connecticut and Boston, worked in an organizing campaign for people living with HIV in South Chicago, and then come to Philadelphia in the 1990s to work at various community-development jobs.

That first visit Manuel and I talked over hamburgers and coffee at a lunch counter around the corner from his office. He told me about the Guatemalan paramilitary's having killed his father—a leader in the resistance forces based in the capital—and kidnapped his nieces before he and his siblings fled the country. I had studied Spanish in Guatemala in 1980, and so at least I knew something of the situation there at the time. I talked about my mother's struggle with lung cancer, and we discussed the effect that personal traumas have on one's vocational choices. Manuel recounted the problems of a married couple—both doctors from Colombia—who had just asked him for help finding work in Philadelphia. He described the computer-literacy class that he himself taught three times a week in the center's computer lab. We shared ideas about teaching and organizing and speculated on why people in the neighborhood wanted so much to "learn computers" and what we could do in response to that strong demand. It turned out we had some friends in common in the Guatemalan refugee community and in the foundation world. (Despite being the fifth-largest city in the United States, Philadelphia often shows itself to be a very small town.) We left with no particular plan but the start of a working friendship.

The next time Manuel and I met, Steve Parks came along, too, and brought his new baby, Jude. Jude was in on the conversation, gumming crackers and magnanimously accepting attention from us and other patrons at the lunch joint. We told Manuel about New City Writing and he told us about his conversations with Johnny Irizarry, a director of an adult-education program in the heart of the Puerto Rican community. I got excited about bringing Johnny into the picture because not only had we worked with him closely before on a couple of projects with New City, but also he is one of the best-known figures in the community arts and cultural organizations of Philadelphia. When he resigned from the Puerto Rican arts organization he had run for many years, the city's main paper ran a front-page article about him, a very rare recognition for a community activist. We had helped Johnny get free tuition to finish a master's degree at Temple during a time when he needed an advanced degree to work with the school district and we needed his guidance to work effectively in the Puerto Rican community. I had always admired Johnny's combination of undying good humor and fierce commitment to social justice, and he knew just about everyone doing anything progressive in Philadelphia neighborhoods. Johnny and Manuel had been talking about developing an approach to literacy and education based on the realities of the Latino neighborhoods, an approach with the liberation attitude of Freire but a feel for the economics on Fifth Street, the heart of Philadelphia's Puerto Rican community. Steve, Manuel, and I all agreed that working together could really be fun.

Let me pause at this point and glance back at the Alinsky principles. Stitched into the story about our unfolding relationship with Manuel are approaches to organizing that differ from what we do in the university. In school there are classes, schedules, books on syllabi, concepts to cover. In a neighborhood there are alliances and enmities, jobs and welfare, abandoned houses and fenced-off gardens. The terrain is less defined and the time isn't parceled out in fifteen-week intervals, but the needs are tremendous and the urgency persists like the stench of a hundred old oil-burning furnaces laboring in winter. Steve and I meet Manuel on his ground, not primarily as professors representing a major institution but as interested people with lives of our own. As we talk we learn more about the challenges people around Proyecto face, what the funding issues are, who teaches and studies there regularly, how the church relates to the school it founded but must let grow independently. I listen for the self-interest of the neighborhood within multiple issues, I express my own self-interest in the project, and I try to see *this* neighborhood specifically as opposed to others in the city or an abstract concept of poor communities. Most of all I allow myself to be guided by Manuel, to learn to trust his vision while still recognizing where I have useful observations to add of my own. We are working together to identify underlying themes that can form the basis of future projects, and both of us

eventually agree that building leadership capacity among the people who go to Proyecto is a central objective.

Soon after that conversation, I visited Manuel's computer class. Twelve people worked at fairly up-to-date computers in a little lab on the second floor. The learners were all women except for one man in his twenties; the women ranged in age from early twenties to late fifties, and all were Latina except one older white woman who spoke no Spanish. Manuel introduced me and I talked a bit about our idea that students need a bridge between where they are now and the community college or Temple courses they might take at the beginning of a college career. Two women spoke to me after class about the possibilities of further links between their computer class and college programs. Rosa was in her early thirties, spoke English with a strong Spanish accent—she had come from Venezuela within the last couple of years—and showed great determination to make a new life for herself and her children. She wanted to know if we were sending tutors right away to Proyecto. She had tried community college one semester and decided it wasn't right for her—too confusing, too much English—but she felt she needed more skills and a better job, and she was anxious to get started right away. I met her again later that week in Manuel's office. Rosa was dressed for an interview, talking to Manuel about work prospects anywhere in the area.

Isabel was a bit younger than Rosa. She asked questions for herself and others in class, and quizzed me afterward about the admission policy at Temple. It turned out she was from a well-known Dominican family that owned a number of grocery stores in the area. She had gone to high school not far away but had moved to the suburbs after her father was murdered in the course of a robbery at one of their corner stores. Her sisters had gone to college but, when Isabel got to the city community college, she felt totally overwhelmed by the work her teacher assigned her in the first remedial writing course, though she had earned good grades in her public school. She dropped out, but not before she'd battled through two remedial reading and writing courses and gotten credit for the first college composition course; by that time she'd met and married a doctor from another Dominican family and was raising two young children in a nearby suburb. She came back to the old neighborhood almost every day, and she wanted to get back to college now, probably at night. Manuel told me later that she was quite capable of doing college work and could pay for it, but she lacked confidence in her abilities at school. Isabel was a powerhouse in her community, raising funds for college scholarships for Dominican students, but her fear of academic work held her back.

At Proyecto later that week, Manuel and I met with Johnny and his assistant director Marta, a Latina woman in her mid-twenties who announced that her aunt had once owned the rowhouse where we were meeting. Also attending were two

white women from an adult-education program called Urban Bridges connected to St. Gabriel's, another Episcopal church, less than a mile northeast of Proyecto in a section of the city called Olney. Felice Similaro, Urban Bridges' director, and her assistant director MaryAnn Borsuk ran a center that served a very mixed community, including Haitians and Puerto Ricans, Cambodians and Africans, with youth programs as well as literacy and technology courses. With a very small paid staff, Urban Bridges depended heavily on the tutoring provided by undergraduates in service-learning classes at a few different regional colleges. Felice and MaryAnn knew a great deal about the range of approaches to adult basic education and also about the support available from the state Department of Education and other government and private agencies. Everyone from the three centers had extensive experience with foundations, but no one felt that their center was on very stable financial ground in this period when an uncertain stock market made grant money tight and foundations unpredictable.

We talked about what we'd like to work toward, and Johnny spoke movingly about learners needing a curriculum suited to their lives and languages. A small, incredibly energetic man, Johnny is quick to smile but speaks with great seriousness and passion about the work needed in his community. He stressed the need to address the pressures neighborhood center students experience—the urgent demand for marketable skills and serviceable English, as well as the confidence and contacts to get them work outside the neighborhood—but at the same time he felt we had to be committed to building leadership in the community and emphasizing the way people can work together to make things better for all. He clearly had a vision of the kind of organizations that work best in Puerto Rican neighborhoods, but at the same time his years of cooperative work made him respectful of other opinions and careful not to dismiss anyone.

At this meeting I took notes on what people wanted us to work toward. The next day I set up a listserv through Temple for the six of us and sent to the list a one-page statement of our purpose and goals, based on my notes from the meeting. At subsequent meetings we talked through the document I had produced. The focus was not only on a "reality-based and transformative" curriculum for information-technology literacy, but on an organizing strategy that would enhance the perspective of teachers in these small computer labs and directors of the programs about what adults could learn from the neighborhood environment. One big issue that emerged for all three centers—and others that people knew about in the area—was the need for more qualified teachers to make the best use of the computer labs they had built with capital grants earlier. We joked about the irony that centers could get money for computers and connectivity, but few foundations or state agencies would pay for the teachers that made those labs useful to the neighborhoods. This was to become a crucial issue for the collaborative to address.

We held a meeting at Johnny's center near the Fifth Street hub of the Puerto Rican neighborhood. Here we revised our document to focus less on technology and more on cooperative support and curricular reform. Here are the first two paragraphs of the document after that meeting:

> The Open Doors Collaborative is a consortium of adult-education programs in North Philadelphia concerned with establishing a comprehensive approach to literacy instruction that is reality-based and transformative for learners. We propose to develop teaching and learning practices that engage learners in active civic participation. In addition to sharing ideas on curriculum and policy, the collaborative hopes to share resources in our effort to maintain computer services, attract and retain excellent staff, and buy hardware and software at competitive rates.
>
> As a first project, we will develop a curriculum that promotes critical thinking, independent inquiry, communication skills, and leadership ability within the specific context of North Philadelphia neighborhoods. This curriculum would also integrate the information technology students are learning in the small computer labs that have grown up in many community centers and churches. It could function as a stand-alone course or as a component of a GED program.

We decided to resist the temptation to look for funding from a foundation for the moment. Almost everybody had a story about foundations that asked their organization to follow all kinds of planning and evaluation procedures, only to find that most of the money in the grant went to experts who planned and evaluated but added nothing to the work with learners. In my minutes of the meeting, I wrote down this remark from Felice: "The problem is that it's so multilayered that by the time the money gets to the base there's little left." Everyone agreed that we would not "chase the money" in this new alliance but formulate our plans and goals first, before we began talking to anyone about funding.

I recount the details of our beginnings in Open Doors not because the specifics matter very much to those who didn't live through it, but to illustrate both the complexity and the pleasure of working in partnership across the university-community divide. To make a new organizing effort go, as Alinsky would say, you have to identify the true self-interest of the communities involved and figure out how to get resources to address those needs. You have to identify well-connected leaders with an effective approach to actual problems in the neighborhood. You have to talk through conflicts and negotiate any tensions among organizations each of which is struggling for its existence. Our meetings continued through the spring and summer, with the group deciding to stay small; an idea of sponsoring a retreat for North Philly community agencies was transformed into an effort to write a grant proposal to support a collaborative project just among our organizations. Felice, who kept Urban Bridges afloat by paying close attention to funding opportunities, ran across a Request for Proposals (RFP) from the U.S. Department of Education

that seemed tailored for us. As she put it at the meeting where we shifted from the retreat idea to the grant, "We don't want to run after the money, but we have to run our organizations, don't we?" We worked intensively on that grant proposal and, though we ended up not submitting it, we weathered some conflicts across our programs arising from personal styles and organizational cultures. The language we produced for that proposal looked as if it would work for other grants in the future, but the founding ideas were taking shape with each iteration.

Open Doors came to recognize that the most pressing need for small neighborhood adult-literacy centers is more well-trained and committed teachers who know the communities in which they work. This is particularly true where information technology is part of the core teaching skill; the best-qualified teachers prefer higher-paying work at for-profit trade schools or community colleges if they can't get solid full-time work in neighborhood centers, even if they are sympathetic to the missions of the centers. We developed a two-pronged approach to this problem. First, we would try to get funding for attractive teaching positions—full-time and with good benefits—for teachers whom our coalition of centers could share. Individual centers might not be able to afford a full-time teacher, but a consortium could share costs, write grant proposals together, and divide the supervisory responsibilities so that all centers would benefit and services to people in the area could increase in scope and quality. Second, we hoped to develop a model of "community educator" on the Latin American model: indigenous education and health workers trained to provide services to their neighbors by the few educated teachers and health-care workers available in the countrysides of many poor nations. We felt this model would also work well for technology and literacy training in underserved urban neighborhoods in the United States.

After about a year and a half of meeting together, the Open Doors group broke up. Johnny was under heavy pressure from his agency to write grant proposals that would save them, and he no longer had time to meet with us. Felice resigned to pursue other projects, and MaryAnn stayed on at Urban Bridges as the group made the transition to connect with a larger social service agency called Episcopal Community Services. Manuel and I, however, continued to meet and develop the concepts. I joined his board as chair and began the job of pulling together community members with little organizational experience and outsiders with expertise but no direct ties to the neighborhood. The Open Doors experience gave concrete expressions to the problems and possible solutions we could apply to neighborhood literacy centers. I taught a class at Temple where I invited four students from Proyecto to participate, and these Proyecto students became our first class of community educators. We are writing grant proposals for Open Borders now that we hope will eventually allow us to go back to our Open Doors partners and develop both the sharing of professional staff and the training of community educators. In addition,

we've worked out a plan for service-learning experiences in Proyecto classes. Community technicians, like community educators, could be paid a stipend to help maintain computer labs in local churches and centers as a means of combining on-the-job training with neighborhood collaboration. I regard the Open Doors project not as a failure but a long-term investment in helping neighborhood leaders identify problems related to literacy and work toward local solutions that eventually will change the way North Philadelphians move through training programs and the way Temple students relate to centers like Proyecto.

Perhaps the most compelling element for me of the approach we developed in Open Doors is the shift in focus from individual to collective improvements. This speaks to the last three principles of Alinsky's organizing approach; the shift honors the experience of disenfranchised people while it points toward greater independence for groups *and* individuals who must see themselves as agents of their own future rather than victims of their history. Manuel has been particularly strong in his argument that, in his own center, the stress should be on how any individual functions within his or her multiple communities. "What are the communities from which you come and to which you wish to return?" he asked a group of his students when I brought rhetoric-composition graduate students from Temple to visit Proyecto. A student I will call Lourdes answered by saying she had three communities. One was in the block or two around her house, a microneighborhood in North Philly populated by immigrants from the Dominican Republic like herself but also by people from Puerto Rico and other Latin American countries. Another was the neighborhood around her husband's little grocery store, a renovated building in an African American neighborhood where the drug trade is intense but where people had been friendly to her and her husband. Lourdes noted that many neighbors there helped her learn English, and now she felt a commitment to make life better in that community, too. Finally Proyecto itself served as a crucial community for her. She was attending classes in computer literacy there three times a week so that she could help her children with their homework. She said at first she couldn't do more than turn her computer on and off, but now she could set up a system and handle word-processing software. She had developed a strong bond with the others in her advanced technology class and wanted to continue working with them. She took great pride in her growing abilities to speak English and manipulate a computer system, but she realized that she had much more to do if she wanted to contribute in significant ways to all these communities. Her own self-interest was intimately tied to the well-being not only of her family but also of the friends and neighbors who have helped make her life since arriving in this country more hopeful and productive.

Soon after that session, Manuel asked Lourdes to train as a community educator with me. In that role, she worked for eight weeks writing and reading with my undergraduate senior seminar. We also invited her to join the board of Proyecto.

Alinsky would have loved her story, for it illustrates not only the effort to help individuals grasp issues they can do something about but also the way to build leadership capacity, hers and those of people who encounter her. She is becoming a leader in her home communities, but—believe me—Lourdes's remarks were not lost on the grad students who heard her, either.

Knowledge Activism

But how is this story relevant to college writing instructors and program administrators? What's so valuable about hanging around in North Philly, making fun of foundations and swapping family stories? And what role does a university writing program play in organizing a neighborhood around literacy? Perhaps the most telling question is the one with which I began this article: who is serving whom? One can never answer the question definitively, even in a single, seemingly static, situation; even the worst university-community relationships can change with the weather. A state-funded research university might pay little attention to the needs of poor neighborhoods—or those scholars who interact with them—until a legislator from an urban district takes over the committee that decides higher-education funding. Suddenly faculty who do community-based work can become important to the university's central administration and the way researchers relate to community needs can come under intense scrutiny. No matter which way the wind blows, the question of who is serving whom needs to be asked again and again.

I served my community partners with an approach I've come to think of as knowledge activism. My experience, the resources I could contribute, and my non-interventionist approach gave me a certain credibility to participate in the organization-development process. I helped found and nurture the Open Doors Collaborative, and I continue to work with Manuel and Proyecto. A study leave from my university when we first got started gave me time that others in the group did not have, and I have contacts in the city literacy network and foundations that proved useful from time to time. My writing skills allowed me to take good notes and shape them into a document we could rework collectively. My experience with literacy instruction and research helped because I could suggest language in grant proposals that might convince funders. I spoke Spanish passably and taught high school in the neighborhood; this local knowledge allowed me to listen intelligently to the conversation. Most important, I was willing to invest time and energy without being in charge, to build alongside others working in the neighborhood rather than enter the scene with a plan already formed. As Alinsky would have it, I met people on their own ground and observed the situation without preconceived notions of what they needed or who they were.

Another aspect of knowledge activism is that I could bring to bear institutional resources that I had at my disposal for my partners' needs. The Temple University

Writing Program had received grant money to participate in community projects, and I was able to provide some funding to start the community-educator training project. I brought graduate and undergraduate classes in contact with Proyecto, and in the last few years my Temple colleagues and I have arranged assistantships, internships, and volunteer positions to aid small nonprofit organizations with few resources of their own. Alinsky's principles, however, operate as useful reminders when knowledge activists begin to draw on their institutional affiliations. University resources, available to us because of our professional (and privileged) positions, must be offered responsibly and cooperatively. It helps no one to give aid without a clear purpose or with no commitment to build relationships across institutions, and it is cynical exploitation to offer resources with hidden agendas based primarily on university-determined objectives.

At the same time, Manuel, Johnny, Felice, and MaryAnn had a store of experiences and allies to share with me. The work they do challenges any narrow understanding of reading and writing confined to the college campus. Rosa, Isabel, and Lourdes reminded me just how broad the spectrum of literacy really is and how high the stakes are for those who do not have full institutional access to literacies of the dominant culture. Literacy researcher Deborah Brandt has noted that "despite ostensible democracy in public education, access to literacy and its rewards continue to flow disproportionately to the children of the already educated and the already affluent"(197). This same heritage of class advantage follows literacy educators as well. Unlike college writing administrators like me at large research universities, directors of adult-education centers do not have tenure or a large institution's budget behind them as they build their programs. Their students and clients often live precariously and must succeed or face welfare cutoffs, unemployment, deportation, or prison. The mission of my partners' adult-education centers forces me to conceive of writing and reading beyond the boundaries of undergraduate and graduate curricula, even when I sit in university committee meetings or hold conferences with dissertation advisees. Located only inside my campus, I can either come to believe my job is terribly exalted, the top of the literacy food chain, or I can despair that I make no difference in the life of anyone. Again, the "throughput" system defines our consciousness and masks the reality of other community and individual objectives in settings off campus. After every Open Doors meeting I remembered that I function inside an institutional framework for literacy that is merely one among many.

In the long run, the shift to a more collective view of education is profound for a college writing program. It can cause us to question the throughput model of education, in which the writing program plays such a prominent part. Of course we want individual students to succeed as they move from general education to major, from wide-eyed (and scared) first-year student to world-weary (and scared) senior. We have a responsibility to help students move through their school careers and be

able to function in jobs afterward. But this model is almost entirely focused on individuals developing a knowledge base and skill set. How do a writing program, a general education curriculum, and a department-based major foster a sense in individuals that they are connected to other citizens in large and small ways? How do we in writing programs make manifest our understanding of literacy as social, local, or efficacious beyond having students read articles that say so? The crucial thing is that we need not see our programs as merely forming a conduit; instead we can position our entire institution as one among many that engage with a wide range of people. When we think of ourselves as members of more than an academic community, our neighborhood connections should be constituted in such a way that students encounter partners engaging in substantial work rather than clients receiving aid.

My encounters with Manuel, Johnny, Felice, MaryAnn, Rosa, Isabel, and Lourdes give me concrete moments for understanding Alinsky's "rules." The time demanded to apply these principles overwhelms me occasionally; the conflicts between the needs of different neighborhoods and the real or perceived goals of the university can seem quite impossible to reconcile. Alinsky stresses that conflict is inevitable and that out of it must arise creative solutions and greater perspective. At the same time, for all his emphasis on conflict, Alinsky's greatest organizing was built on well-tested friendships. Like organizing, literacy work can be sustained by such friendships even amidst conflict. On the other hand, the specialization and risk-aversion common in university life, the narrow formulations of self-interest and turf protection that seem inevitable in every adult endeavor—these are ways of handling conflict that can exhaust the spirit and wither the mind completely. If we are willing to accept roles as participants or even knowledge activists rather than detached observers or paid consultants, we can reframe for ourselves the sites and texts of literacy instruction through satisfying and reciprocal relationships with our neighborhood partners.

Note

Works Cited

Adler-Kassner, Linda, Robert Crooks, and Ann Watters, eds. *Writing the Community: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in Composition*. Washington: American Assn. for Higher Education, 1997.

Alinsky, Saul. *Reveille for Radicals*. New York: Vintage, 1946.

———. *Rules for Radicals*. New York: Vintage, 1971.

Brandt, Deborah. *Literacy in American Lives*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001.

Chaden, Caryn, Roger Graves, David A. Jolliffe, and Peter Vandenberg. "Confronting Clashing Discourses: Writing the Space between Classrooms and Community in Service Learning Courses." *Reflections* 2.2 (2002): 19–39.

Cushman, Ellen. "Sustainable Service Learning Programs." *CCC* 54 (2002): 40–65.

Deans, Thomas. *Writing Partnerships: Service-Learning in Composition*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2000.

"Episcopal Editor Denounces Saul Alinsky." *Christian Century* 15 Nov. 1967: 1452.

Finks, P. David. *The Radical Vision of Saul Alinsky*. New York: Paulist, 1984.

Flower, Linda. "Intercultural Inquiry and the Transformation of Service." *College English* 65 (2002): 181–201.

Flower, Linda, Elenore Long, and Lorraine Higgins. *Learning to Rival: A Literate Practice for Intercultural Inquiry*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2000.

"The Gadfly of the Poverty War." *Newsweek* 13 Sept. 1965: 30–32.

Grabill, Jeffrey T., and Lynée Lewis Gaillet. "Writing Program Design in the Metropolitan University: Toward Constructing Community Partnerships." *Writing Program Administration* 25.3 (2002): 61–78.

Herzberg, Bruce. "Community Service and Critical Teaching." *CCC* 45 (1994): 307–19.

Horwitt, Sanford D. *Let Them Call Me Rebel: Saul Alinsky—His Life and Legacy*. New York: Knopf, 1989.

Hyatt, Susan, ed. *The Forgotten Bottom*. Philadelphia: New City, 2002.

Lyons, Mark, and August Tarrier, eds. *Espejos y Ventanas/Mirrors and Windows.* Philadelphia: New City Community P, 2004.

Ott, Gil, ed. *No Restraints:* An Anthology of Disability Culture. Philadelphia: New City, 2002.

Parks, Steve, and Eli Goldblatt. "Writing beyond the Curriculum: Fostering New Collaborations in Literacy." *College English* 62 (2000): 584–606.

Peck, Wayne C., Linda Flower, and Lorraine Higgins. "Community Literacy." *CCC* 46 (1995): 199–222.

"Radical Saul Alinsky: Prophet of Power to the People." *Time* 2 Mar. 1970: 56–57.

Ronald, Kate, and Hephzibah Roskelly. "Untested Feasibility: Imagining the Pragmatic Possibility of Paulo Freire." *College English* 63 (2001): 612–32.

Sanders, Marion K. "The Professional Radical: Conversations with Saul Alinsky." *Harper's Magazine* June 1965: 37–47.

———. "The Professional Radical Moves In on Rochester: Conversations with Saul Alinsky, Part 2." *Harper's Magazine* July 1965: 52–59.

Schutz, Aaron, and Anne Ruggles Gere. "Service Learning and English Studies: Rethinking 'Public' Service." *College English* 60 (1998): 129–49.

Silberman, Charles E. *Crisis in Black and White*. New York: Vintage, 1964.

Slayton, Robert A. *Back of the Yards: The Making of a Local Democracy*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986.

Tarrier, August, ed. *The Forgotten Bottom Remembered: Stories from a Philadelphia Neighborhood.* Philadelphia: New City P, 2003.