Navigating Community Partnerships

 The deep-rooted negative stigma of South-Central Los Angeles and its community still lingers within fearful neighboring residents despite efforts of gentrification and rebranding its name to South Los Angeles. However, non-profit organizations such as 826LA dedicated to support young scholars to develop fundamental writing skills, joins South LA residents and its neighboring communities to collaborate creatively, ultimately instigating a small yet positive social change for future generations. Discussed in class and assigned readings, community engagement advocates, sociologists and affected students express their concern and offer solutions to reexamine community partnerships more than a mere volunteering opportunity for a grade but as a critical study of cultural geography, social construction and an opportunity to foster unified empathy within distinct communities. Additionally, it is quintessential to carefully consider and respect the differences regarding language, location, diversity, poverty and cultural norms between oneself and their community partner and to engage in reflective and direct community partnerships, focusing on responding to the urgent needs of the community (which can be inferred from direct experiences such as being a flaneur but also researching and reading published articles, essays and statistics focused on South LA communities), and emphasizing learning as a way to see and to gain a deeper understanding of their surroundings in a social context.

Contemporary social construction of South LA is still riddled with negative connotations, influenced by historical gang culture, high crime and poverty rates. While media and the lack of critical study of geography may contribute to the large quantity of students and faculty who stay within the “USC bubble,” ultimately one’s limited social circle and the lack of volunteerism focusing on assisting those who struggle financially, emotionally or even academically plays a larger role in normalizing the image that South LA residents are “uncultured” and “violent.” Last semester, when I volunteered at JEP for my sociology of LA youths’ class, I learned that many notorious gangs such as MS-13 presented on media makes the lowest percentage of what South LA residents are. In fact, most gangs consist of a wide variety of young adolescents to full-time working parents. Prior to taking this course, my perception of South Central was entirely from media and rumors, but after interactions with students and studies who claim that young adolescents join gangs for independence, to have fun, and to escape problems back at home rather than to solely commit crimes, my perception of them changed completely. This proves that it is possible to make an individual change their opinion of a place radically if their original beliefs are challenged with concrete evidence such as an educational course. But, for those who are not willing to critically think about their neighboring communities or are not factual learners, powerful speeches, media or even texts help readers to indirectly visualize the author’s experience. Nonetheless, direct experiences such as volunteering or being a flaneur may be the strongest circumstance to change an individual’s previous beliefs.

 Prior to community engagement, being a flaneur (walking as a form of writing) and drawing mental maps of their community partner to their university or community is an effective strategy to broaden perceptions regarding class, race and stereotypes of its residents by pre-exposing the physical infrastructure and atmosphere of the community. Mental maps illustrate one’s judgement and perception of a certain place influenced by their beliefs and personal experiences. Because “mental maps are not a cognitive construction but a social construction,” it is more accurate to draw mental maps combined with flaneur as it helps to paint a more realistic representation of the community with raw insights that cannot be told or felt through stories or pictures (Nedra Reynolds “Maps of the Everyday”). This is because “learning to see” can result in collaborative projects to “restore neighborhoods,” to “reclaim buildings” and to embrace community life as traces of class distinctions become clear within neighborhoods and districts of South LA. For example, while the community of University of Southern California resides within South LA, gentrification is present such as the old University Village being transformed to The Village due to the profitable and predominant middle-upper class of White/Caucasian consumers, displacing previous residents. In addition, past its protected barriers, students and faculty seldomly explore past certain areas of South LA due to the negative reputation of gang activity and high crime rates. Personally, when I first visited South LA and USC, I felt a clear separation between gentrified areas such as Exposition Park versus cities of Inglewood and Watts, and I felt fear when I heard rumors to not venture alone at night as there is a high crime rate. Reflecting back, that fear could have been easily navigated into a method of improvisation/learning experience, “a type of performance that continually privileges, transforms, or abandons the spatial elements in the constructed order,” if only I had the open mindset to embrace uncomfortable “spaces of ambiguity.” Growing up in Fairfax, Virginia, a sheltered and protected community, I may not be able to depict the most accurate map of my community partner. Instead, one way to prepare myself would be to personally visit their neighborhoods (or virtually), compare what is different from my neighborhood, and critically analyze why it may be different. Ultimately, by learning to see and walking at street level, one can experience “the disquieting familiarity of the city” which can assist in helping students to be more mindful of “how they navigate space, inhabit places, or encounter differences” when volunteering or venturing beyond the “USC bubble” (Nedra Reynolds “Reading Landscapes and Walking the Streets”).

Holding judgmental preconceptions based on media, stereotypes and statistics may prevent one to wholeheartedly interact with their community partner and their surrounding community. This is certainly the case with my last year’s approach when volunteering for JEP and visiting USC’s neighboring communities. Assuming that certain people, places and boundaries are “unsafe” and fearing the community as a whole may worsen the quality of interaction during volunteering because it portrays a negative first impression that the individual is not open-minded or may be volunteering simply for a grade. This semester, rather than holding any positive or negative assumptions from past experience, an optimal solution could be to hold no assumptions at all in order to quickly absorb new observations and interactions. Additionally, entering volunteerism with an open-mindset to not only share one’s expertise and experiences but to also to learn other student’s expertise contributes to positive interactions as both sides can benefit and teach each other what they want their neighboring communities to know. While it is vital that tutors and tutees communicate, it is also important that tutors discuss and reflect amongst themselves on what solutions that have worked and failed for them when approaching certain barriers.

 Ideal service learning consists of a direct form of volunteering “geared toward improving the lives of individual persons” paired with frequent reflection. Tania D. Mitchell and David M. Donahue assert that socially constructed images of the ideal conceptualized student -- “white, sheltered, middle-class, single, without children, un-indebted, and between ages 18 and 24” -- contrasts with the realities of the communities. Because of this, it is significant to reflect upon the “complex realities” through volunteering as “not all students are intimately familiar with social” issues of their volunteering community. Community partnerships such as 826LA provide an opportunity for privileged individuals “to hear marginalized voices” and “to learn about the effects of poverty, homelessness, and low-performing schools” (Tania D. Mitchell and David M. Donahue “Ideal and Real In-Service Learning”). Because integrating the voices of marginalized communities with academic curriculums promotes empathy and better understanding of how one can respectfully approach those outside their community, it is crucial that students are exposed outside of their safety bubble at an earlier age. Additionally, reflecting and addressing the objectives of community partnerships and the community partners’ desires will also improve and address the “realities of student’ lives and the capacity of organizations” (Tania D. Mitchell and David M. Donahue “Ideal and Real In-Service Learning”). This is reflected by my JEP assignment last year, where students had to participate in weekly reflective discussions, write essays underscoring cultural differences, and give each other feedback. By engaging in small group discussions, not only were students able to develop soft skills ranging from collaboration and adaptivity to new cultures, but they were also able to assist students’ critical thinking abilities and to reflect on the root causes of inequality and negative stigma in South LA.

While the aspect of “joint” and “collaborating” virtually seems concerning to those worried about the fact that students may not be able to gain the full interactive, hands-on experience by learning in a traditional classroom environment due to poor communication, technological issues and distractions relating to the change in environment, overall, approaching community partnerships with a positive mindset and utilizing the virtual advantages such as that it enhances the presentational format of a lesson by allowing students to share screens, files, reactions, and even record sessions allows students to navigate around this conflict. Furthermore, it is essential that students reflect on community partnerships while drawing mental maps or being a flaneur frequently, critically studying their community partner’s geography, in order to gain empathy for their partner. Because of the historically negative reputation of South Central, it is important to focus on responding to the needs of the community by actively listening to the marginalized voices and volunteering wholeheartedly. Because volunteerism brings the aspect of surrounding myself in a new environment, learning and tutoring and developing valuable social skills, I am thrilled to engage with 826LA this semester.