

**Introducing Youth to Community Organizing:
A Curriculum on Community Organizing in African American Communities**

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Ed P&L 834
June 1, 2010

Overview

As the “bedrock of democratic institutions,” community organizing has a strong history in America (Weil & Gamble, 2002, p.256). Beginning with immigrant communities in the early 20th century, community organizing has come to be a well-recognized method of making social change. Within an empowering framework, community organizers seek to develop the capacity of communities to organize and address social issues involving shifts in power and resources (Weil & Gamble, 2002). Early community organizers influenced several social movements, including the civil rights movement. Youth today rarely receive specific instruction in community organizing. Recent emphasis on 21st Century Skills emphasizes social responsibility and civic participation; these skills, however, are not directly linked to social action (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2009). This curriculum presents initial activities to help students gain an understanding of community organizing in African American communities. In addition, students will become familiar with selected techniques commonly utilized in community organizing.

Recent Developments in Community Organizing

Community organizing became more formalized and received much more scholarly attention in the latter-half of the 20th Century. Notably, Saul Alinsky became famous in the 1940s as a leader in community organizing across the nation. Alinsky’s early organizing efforts focused on power dynamics across community groups, particularly in relation to the notion of communities taking power back from elite segments of society (Netting, Kettner, & McMurtry, 2004). More recently, Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) introduced Asset-Building Community Development (ABCD), which focuses on communities’ existing strengths and empowers community members to make changes for the public good. ABCD offers a paradigm shift in community organizing, moving from notions of lost power that must be regained to focus on the

existing power within communities. Assets that are often present in communities (but often unrecognized) include personal attributes and skills, available physical resources, and well-developed formal and informal social networks (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). While initial grassroots community organizing efforts also encouraged intense participation from community members, ABCD places great priority on community-driven change. The role of the community organizer is similar to that in more traditional Alinsky-style organizing; however, greater emphasis is placed on training and activation of more formalized institutional resources (e.g., community organizations) that can increase community empowerment and lead to greater sustainability for the change effort.



Asset Based Community Development

Strategies and Tactics

Community organizing research and scholarship highlight specific strategies and tactics of community organizing, distinguishing it from other related aspects of social change processes (e.g., activism, service provision, etc.). As community organizing is intended to develop the capacity of community members and to address needs within communities, several key strategies are necessary. It is important to note that these strategies are undertaken with a specific

community issue mind. These strategies include mobilization, targeted use of media, and direct action.

Mobilization involves gathering people to develop a shared vision and agenda centered on a specific local issue. This mobilization often includes a needs/assets assessment designed to identify available services, gaps in services, and strengths/assets across systems within a community (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Netting et al., 2004). As a result, community members are then able to identify needs within a community and available assets to address these needs. For instance, a community may conduct a needs and assets assessment in relation to available childcare options within a community. They may identify several formal childcare centers and informal resources as well (e.g., local mothers who are willing to babysit). They may also find that the formal childcare centers are full or too expensive. Further, available childcare centers may be off the local bus route. This would represent a need for more affordable and accessible childcare. In this example, the needs and assets assessment found that, in some cases, no assets were available, and, more often, existing assets were inadequate. As a result, the group may decide that this issue warrants further targeted action.

The utilization of the media is also an emerging priority within community organizing (Netting et al., 2004). Getting the group's message out to the public can help generate support and make a strong presence known to those the group is targeting. Community organizers often disseminate press releases to highlight local events and actions, gather in community forums to share information, and generate messages using videos and music to gain notoriety.

Aggressive direct action may also be necessary when organizing communities. Many community organizers utilize targeted confrontation to gain influence and power. It is important to distinguish confrontation from violent conflict. While some organizers choose to use violence,

confrontation does not need to include violence. Confrontation tactics, such as protests and rallies, can allow for power dynamics to shift in favor of historically oppressed groups (Hardina, 2007). For instance, a community organizer may lead a group to block a local highway construction project in fear that it will lead to destruction in a neighborhood. Community organizers must always be aware of the risks and benefits of confrontation (Hardina, 2007).

Community Organizing in African American Communities

History yields several examples of successful community organizing within African American communities. The civil rights movement is perhaps the most well-known outcome of numerous community organizing efforts across the United States. For instance, Ella Baker and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee were instrumental to the widespread efforts to challenge existing policies and practices that excluded and oppressed African Americans. The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI) in Boston, MA offers an example of ABCD that addressed numerous issues in the Roxbury neighborhood. Likewise, Project MASH (Make Something Happen) in Stowe Village Housing Project of Hartford, CT engaged in community organizing to address housing and job issues in this community.

In recent years, additional scholarship has focused on youth organizing efforts across the nation. Mark Warren (2008) defines youth organizing as activities in which “young people work collectively to identify issues of concern and mobilize their peers to build action campaigns for achieving their objectives” (p. 27). Youth organizing is distinguished from other youth movements, such as advocacy for youth rights and the provision of services for youth; these distinctions highlight the emphasis in youth organizing on the development of youth leadership and youth participation in direct action (Warren, 2008). In addition to community-level change, evidence also indicates that youth also receive benefits from these efforts. Youth organizing can

positively impact young people's self-worth and belonging (Mohamed & Wheeler, 2001). Examples of youth organizing include the Hyde Square Task Force, Baltimore Algebra Project, and South Central Youth Empowered thru Action. Additional information on these groups is available in the Bibliography and Appendix. In addition, the Californians for Justice is a statewide alliance of youth organizations that includes successes in relation to school reform.

Curriculum Summary

This curriculum builds upon the long history of community organizing in the United States, particularly in African American communities. More recent developments in youth organizing offer examples of successful strategies for social action that involve youth leadership. The activities herein offer youth opportunities to develop a fundamental understanding of community organizing, gain a historical understanding of community organizing in African American communities, and develop basic skills in specific strategies and tactics involved in community organizing.

Curriculum Objectives

1. Students will understand the definition of community organizing.
2. Students will become familiar with various strategies and methods commonly utilized in grassroots community organizing.
3. Students will become familiar with historical examples of community organizing in African American communities.
4. Students will be able to critically evaluate the potential consequences of community organizing in African American communities.
5. Students will be able to identify areas for intervention within their own communities and begin initial progress toward addressing targeted local issues.

Activities

Activity One: Defining Community Organizing

This first activity introduces students to the fundamentals of community organizing, including an understanding of self interest and community interest. Students will understand the definition of community organizing and begin to consider how people organize to make change. While there are various types of community organizing (e.g., activism, coalition building), the focus here will be on direct action/grassroots community organizing. Thus, community organizing can be defined as the collective activities of community members to make change for the good of the community.

Total Time: 3 hours

Materials: Survival scenario (see Appendix)

Directions:

- a. Facilitate a discussion exploring the concepts of self interest and community interest. Self interest is an individual's concern for his/her own life priorities and those of people connected to him/her. Community interest represents a collective concern for the well-being, health, and safety of the group. Sample guiding questions include:
 1. Why do you do the things you do?
 2. Why are you here today?
 3. Are there times that you do things even if they don't directly benefit you?
 4. Do people sometimes do things only because they benefit others?
 5. Are there times that doing something for yourself could hurt another group of people?
 6. What if something that is in your self-interest is not in the interest of the community?
- b. Define community organizing: helping people create change in their communities, change that is aligned with their self-interests and the community-interest. One example might be a group of people organizing to have old abandoned houses torn down in their neighborhood. Power is an important concept in community organizing. Many times people who have power use this power to satisfy their own self-interest. When

community organizing, many people join together to create collective power that ensure the community interest is satisfied.

- c. Complete a “survival scenario.” See the Appendix for an example.
- d. Process the activity with focus on team building strategies, self-interest v. community interest, and problem solving techniques:
 1. How did your team make decisions?
 2. Did certain people influence the team decisions? How did they do this?
 3. How did you handle disagreements?
 4. How did you feel about the decisions?
 5. What are examples of decisions that served your own self interest? The community interest?
 6. Rank how satisfied you were with the team’s decisions.
 7. How did others persuade you to agree with them? How did you persuade others?

Activity Two: Community Organizing in African American Communities

Community organizing often takes place in African American communities. Many examples illustrate the importance of mobilizing to create change for the public good. This activity encourages students to explore historical examples of community organizing in African American communities. Students will become familiar with various examples of community organizing in African American communities throughout history. Students also will examine the various strategies utilized in these examples.

Total Time: 3 hours for lecture/discussion; 1-2 weeks for students to develop projects

Materials: *Holding Ground: The Rebirth of Dudley Street*

Directions:

- a. Introduce one example of organizing in African American communities. Potential examples are listed in the Appendix (under Activity Four). Help students identify the main issues people were organizing around: What did the people in these communities want to change? How did they think it would improve their lives? Did everyone agree?
- b. Show *Holding Ground: The Rebirth of Dudley Street* to provide one concrete example of community organizing in an African American community in Boston
- c. Process the movie with students, focusing on identifying the main issues within the community, specific strategies used by the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, and potential changes students would have made to the process.

Process Questions:

1. What was the main issue that the Dudley Street Initiative initially targeted for change?
2. Who were the key players in the Initiative?
3. What were some tactics they used to mobilize others?
4. How long did it take them to gain widespread support from others in the community?
5. What were some confrontational strategies they used?
6. How did they involve the legislature?
7. Do you think they were successful?
8. What would you have done differently?



Activity Three: Biographical Poster Presentations

Students will become familiar with several examples of community organizing in African American communities, building upon lessons learned in Activity Three. Students will be responsible for creating a poster that describes a community organizing group or person throughout history who created change in an African American community. Several examples are available in the Appendix.

Total Time: 1-2 weeks to create posters; 1 day to share

Materials: Craft supplies, research materials (library books, credible websites, movies, etc.)

Directions:

- a. Remind students of the example of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (Activity Three).
- b. Provide a list of other organizing initiatives and people in other African American communities (see Appendix).
- c. Ask students to select one group/person and create a poster that summarizes these efforts, including:
 1. Name of organizer, time period of initiative, location
 2. Key issues within the organizing effort
 3. Key people involved in the organizing
 4. Description of the community and its members (demographics, points of interest, etc.)
 5. Specific tactics utilized by the organizers
 6. Outcomes of the organizing
- d. Have students present their posters in small groups (e.g, groups of 5 students each present among themselves).



Activity Four: Community Forum

Sometimes the public believes that any effort to organize communities is a good effort. Other times, the public is consistently skeptical of community organizers, citing evidence of self interests rising above public good. This activity will help students understand that there are often implications for community organizing efforts, some positive and some negative. The process of role playing a community forum will help students learn one specific technique to identify and appropriately address dissenting opinions. Likewise, students will be encouraged to identify specific tactics often used by community organizers to confront problems in their efforts.

Total Time: 6 hours for lecture/discussion, student preparation, and role play; spread over multiple session

Materials: Case scenarios for each group

Directions:

- a. Community forums offer a public space to disseminate information, share ideas, and mobilize others for change. Community organizers can host community forums or attend forums hosted by other groups to spread information about their cause. Present students with a neighborhood scenario:

You live in a large urban neighborhood in Cleveland that is strongly separated by class. The Northside of the neighborhood is more affluent, with larger, clean houses, numerous parks and community centers, and newly-built schools. The Southside of the neighborhood has dilapidated houses, abandoned buildings, dirty sidewalks, and an increasing number of convenience stores and adult stores. Most of the people on the Southside are unemployed, highly mobile, and renting their place of residence. Much of the Northside residents own their homes. Southside residents have become increasingly frustrated with their community because crime is increasing, children are unable to play outside, and the number of stores that sell alcohol, tobacco, and adult material are increasing.

Recently, a prominent Northside business owner announced plans to open three new convenience stores on the Southside, all located within walking distance of the

elementary and middle schools. The business owner stated that he was hopeful his new stores could provide additional employment for local residents. Southside community members expressed frustration that the Northside continues to profit from the degradation of their community. They worry that these stores will foster increased criminal activity in their community, as existing stores have become sites for drug activity, prostitution, and illegal sale of alcohol to minors.

- b. Discuss the main issues evident in the case study to ensure that students understand the case.
- c. Divide students into two groups and distribute further case descriptions appropriate for each group.

Group 1: Community members who oppose the stores.

You are a resident of the Southside. You have lived there for years and have seen the community become more dilapidated over recent years. At the same time, you have witnessed the Northside prosper. You feel that it is unfair for residents of your community to continue to deal with high crime, bad landlords, and unfair community development practices. You oppose the new convenience stores because you fear that they will make the community worse. Right now, people loiter outside the existing stores, dealing drugs or soliciting prostitutes. You are also worried that young children will be forced to walk by these schools on their way to school. The employment that the Northside developers say will come to the Southside is not worth the risk of ruining the community.

Group 2: Northside business owners who propose continued building on the Southside.

You own several small convenience stores on the Southside. They have all been extremely successful, increasing profits each year. Your stores sell magazines, candy, soda pop, alcohol, snack foods, and cigarettes. All of the stores' have staff who are residents of the Southside. You would like to continue building stores on the Southside because it seems that the residents utilize the stores, buy goods at the stores, and work in the stores. Southside residents who complain about the new stores do not

understand that it could help their community. You consider leading a group of Southside residents to organize in support of the stores. Some residents, particularly those who work at the stores, would like to continue adding new stores in the area.

- d. Southside residents who oppose the stores will host a community forum designed to gain support for their cause. Each group should prepare statements for the forum:
1. Their stance on the issue.
 2. Key arguments supporting their stance.
 3. Statements to refute others' claims.
 4. Statements summarizing how their stance could impact the community.

Hold a role play forum in which each group presents their stance and then debates back and forth, including the statements prepared above.

Potential Modifications:

Students could also continue the forum with specific people taking on the roles of various interest group representatives. This will allow students the opportunity to learn specific tactics often utilized by community organizers (Hardina, 2007). Potential roles include:

- Local police officers' representative
- Neighborhood Business Association
- Local school administrator
- Religious leaders

Potential tactics include:

- Structuring the agenda to limit the time allotted for specific groups
- Limiting seating space
- Skewing the audience to include a majority of supporters
- Yelling, refusing to sit down, etc.
- Ending the meeting early due to unruly behavior

Activity Five: Youth Organizing and Needs/Assets Assessments

Many youth across the country are leading community organizing efforts to address issues that directly affect youth in their neighborhoods. This activity will help students become familiar with youth organizing and some examples of it in practice today. Students will then take initial steps to identify local needs and assets in their communities after identifying an issue of interest to them.

Total Time: 3 hours instruction/discussion, 3 weeks to develop Assessment Boxes

Materials: Boxes for student assessments; craft supplies; digital cameras and recorders

Directions:

- a. Present two examples of youth organizing to students. Potential examples are summarized here. For more information on these groups, please see the article by Mark Warren cited in the Bibliography. Additional resources are available in the Appendix as well.
 1. Hyde Square Task Force is a youth organization in the Boston neighborhood of Jamaica Plain. It is comprised of youth organizers who have focused on addressing sexual harassment in their schools. They developed a planning strategy, including awareness campaigns and petitioning the school board for changes.
 2. Baltimore Algebra Project is a youth organizing in Baltimore, Maryland that encourages peer-to-peer tutoring. Youth campaigned to address inequities in resources and supplies for students in their community. They conducted rallies to protest funding inequities and were invited to participate in special hearings on funding in the Baltimore school system.
- b. Help students brainstorm issues in their community that they might want to address. Track their ideas on a large sheet of paper. Help them prioritize these issues to identify one issue that they could focus on here.
- c. Discuss the process of conducting a Needs/Assets Assessment.
 1. An assessment is a systematic method of identifying problems and strengths within one community. It includes the identification of needs (areas for improvement) and assets (areas of strength). It is important to first consider how

you will define your community (Is it your school? Your street? Your block? Your church? Your neighborhood?).

2. Begin with your classroom. Help students identify needs and assets in the classroom. Some examples include:
 - i. Needs: Too few computers for number of students, room is too small, chairs are uncomfortable
 - ii. Assets: The heating and cooling are reliable, everyone has a private space for their materials, adequate supplies of paper, chalk, pencils, get to decorate in the manner we choose
 3. Discuss ways to identify needs and assets:
 - i. Observation (take pictures, videos, draw what you see)
 - ii. Interviews with community members
 - iii. Gather materials (newspaper articles, census data)
 4. Keeping track of your data can involve several methods: Some people like to make charts listing the needs/assets and then identifying specific people associated with those assets (e.g., community center director). You may wish to divide students in groups to complete needs/assets charts centered on a specific example.
- d. Students will conduct a Needs/Assets Assessment in a Box.
1. Each student should select an issue upon which to focus (these could draw from the list generated earlier).
 2. Students will each complete an assessment that identifies needs and assets in relation to their identified issue. They will compile artifacts from their assessment and place them a box to collect their materials.
 3. Assessments should include both needs and assets and include:
 - i. One interview with a community member
 - ii. Several artifacts from their own observations:
 1. Pictures/Drawings
 2. Video recordings
 3. Symbols of what they have seen (e.g., an empty trash bag to signify dirty streets)

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APPENDIX: Resources and Tools for Activities

Activity One: Survival Scenario

This survival scenario was adapted from existing scenarios used to teach children about surviving in nature (www.redmondfamily.com and www.wilderdom.com). This specific scenario has been developed to focus on team-building skills and group decision-making for the purposes of understanding community organizing.

This is an activity in group decision-making. Students must be divided into groups (<6 each) and instructed to read the scenario and determine which items they should take with them. Consensus building should be encouraged but it is often too difficult to get true consensus. Encourage students to at least partially agree to their final list. They should avoid changing their minds simply to meet agreement or avoid conflict. It is also helpful to set a time limit (20 minutes). This task should be completed without the use of voting. Follow with process questions listed within the curriculum.

Survival Scenario

You are sailing on a yacht in the Caribbean. A fire has suddenly destroyed much of the yacht and its contents. Because the fire also destroyed navigational equipment on board, you can only estimate that you are approximately 1,000 miles from the nearest land.

Fourteen items remained intact and undamaged. You also have a life raft with oars that can carry everyone aboard the yacht and the 15 items listed below. The only other materials you have available are the contents of survivors' pockets: several books of matches, five one-dollar bills, and four sticks of chewing gum. Your task is to rank the 14 items below in terms of their importance to your survival, with 1 as most important and 14 as least important.

- Small transistor radio
- Shaving mirror
- Shark repellent
- 5 gallon can of water
- 20 sq.ft. of opaque plastic
- Mosquito netting
- 1 case of food rations
- Maps of the area
- Seat cushion (flotation device)
- 2 gallon can of oil/gas mixture
- 1 quart of 160 proof rum
- 15 ft. of nylon rope
- 2 boxes of chocolate bars
- Fishing kit

Activity Three: Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative

The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI) is a community organizing initiative in a racially and ethnically diverse Boston neighborhood. Residents include members who are African American, White, Cape Verdean, and Latino. Beginning as a grassroots initiative, DSNI has achieved great success fighting an arson epidemic, illegal dumping, and gentrification through the use of direct action and coalition building. The mission of DSNI is: “To empower Dudley residents to organize, plan for, create and control a vibrant, diverse and high quality neighborhood in collaboration with community partners.”

Additional resources about DSNI:

Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative Homepage: www.dsni.org

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Activity Four: Examples of Community Organizing in African American CommunitiesElla Baker

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Columbus Housing Justice

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Saul Alinsky

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Barack Obama

Obama, B. (2007). *Dreams of my father: A story of race and inheritance*. New York: Crown Press.

Blocks Together

Blocks Together Homepage: <http://www.blockstogether.org/>

Chicago Freedom School

Chicago Freedom School Homepage (in the tradition of Mississippi Freedom Schools)
www.chicagofreedomschool.org

Activity Five: Youth Organizing

Hyde Square Task Force: www.hydesquare.org

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