**Forms of Sustainability and Levels of Civic Education and Change:**

**Beyond Service-Learning**

Douglas D. Perkins, Ph.D.

Center for Community Studies, Peabody College, Vanderbilt University

Keynote Address to the THESA Conference on Sustainability and Service-Learning

November 12, 2010

[SLIDE 1:]

Although my PhD is in community psychology, I am not at all a traditional psychologist and have spent the past 25 years in different kinds of applied interdisciplinary social science programs, including Environment and Behavior within a Department of Family and Consumer Studies at the University of Utah and in programs in Community Leadership; Community Development & Action; and Community Research & Action all within a Department of Human & Organizational Development here at Peabody College. And in all of those programs, service-learning and the civic education that I will emphasize today are valued pedagogies. In my current department, substantial experiential training (not to equate that necessarily with either service-learning or civic education) is required of all majors.

[SLIDE 2]

Despite my admitted natural science limitations, I thought I should start by outlining the problem of sustainability at least as far as I am familiar with it, although this risks being less like “preaching to the choir” and more like a chorister preaching to a bunch of preachers. (I considered calling you a College of Cardinals, but I thought I should keep things ecumenical.) Perhaps due to my years living in the West, like all of you I am acutely aware of the connections between population growth, urban and suburban sprawl, our car culture, and ecological unsustainability.

[SLIDE 3:]

Americans (including we Tennesseans) love our cars. Ask yourselves these telling questions: Have you ever named your car? Do you dine regularly in your car? Did you get a job to get a car? Would you be a geek (or even more of a geek) without a car? Americans harbor deep psychological associations with our cars—they are our personal Declarations of Independence; they are status symbols.

[SLIDE 4:]

But Americans, or at least our “greatest generations,” have proven to be adaptable and will even change our car purchasing and driving behavior when pushed hard enough in terms of persuasive media, costs, and the right incentives.

[SLIDE 5:]

And we love our single-family detached homes surrounded by our Chemlawns on large lots...IF you can afford it and haven’t lost it in foreclosure.

[SLIDE 6:]

Cities and especially suburbs have grown and sprawled across the “Sun Belt,” including here in Tennessee.

[SLIDE 7:]

But do we really want Tennessee to become like L.A., Houston, Dallas, Phoenix, Vegas, Atlanta, the Northeast Corridor, Florida, or Mexico City?

[SLIDE 8:]

Here is a Sierra Club Sprawl Hall of Shame from about 12 years ago showing the most sprawling large, medium, small towns. It is surprising that Nashville was not so honored by the Sierra Club since it topped a list several years ago of sprawling U.S. cities based on low population density by metropolitan area.

[SLIDE 9: World Population Distribution by Region, 1800–2050]

And it is not just an American problem, although we represent a vital aspect of the problem due to our extremely high rates of consumption and carbon footprint as a society. By population, in fact, North America and Europe are nothing compared to Asia and growth rates in Africa and Latin America.

[SLIDE 10: World’s 10 Largest Cities: 1950, 1985, 2008]

These trends are also reflected in the rapid urbanization of the world’s population, particularly in less-developed countries. As urbanist John Palen noted back in 1997, “While city growth in developed countries is virtually stagnant, large cities in less-developed countries are growing by a million people a week” (Palen, 1997, p. 373). Urbanization in less-developed countries is both quantitatively and qualitatively different than in the U.S. and Europe and involves much bigger challenges, including the pace of over-urbanization, health, sanitation, water and other infrastructure demands, housing (including slums and squatter settlements), crime, employment (including extralegal and other informal-sector economies), and education (where the population is heavily skewed toward young people, many of whom are not living with parents including many on the streets).

[SLIDE 11: U.N. report: World urbanization prospects]

Let’s look at a series of world population trends over longer and longer timelines. This first one is from 1950 and projects to 2030 and shows that in 2008, where the red line representing the world’s urban population crosses the blue line representing the rural population, half of the world’s population, about 3 and a half billion people, were urban dwellers. With an annual growth rate twice as high as that of the total population over the next 25 years, the world’s urban population is projected to increase to 4.9 billion people by 2030, or roughly 60% of the world’s population. And so now, for the first time in human history, most humans are urban dwellers, which is ultimately a good and necessary thing for sustainability. But…

[SLIDE12: World Population Growth, 1750–2150]

…the accelerating overall population growth is definitely NOT a good thing for sustainability, nor is the sprawling, low-density form of urban and suburban development that is so popular in the U.S. and especially in this part of the country. This longer timeline is from 1750 to 2150 and contrasts the flat growth in the wealthiest countries with the steep growth in developing countries. But again, increased energy and food consumption and waste production in developed countries like ours makes sustainability a critical problem everywhere.

[SLIDE 13: World Population Growth Through History]

Here’s the last and longest timeline from the UN and Population Reference Bureau. It runs from 1 million years B.C. to 5,000 A.D. You can see that, from this long, evolutionary view, we are right in the middle of this incredible human population explosion, which they project will naturally start leveling off around the end of this century as the global population exceeds 10 billion or more, which they evidently consider the upper limit of what the earth’s resources can support. And so, I fear that until we manage to seriously flatten population growth, no amount of clean energy, green buildings, or lifestyle changes will make our biosphere and human so-called civilization sustainable, although try we must.

[SLIDE 14: ”3 pillars" of social, environmental & economic sustainability]

Let’s turn now to what is meant by sustainability. In the simplest terms, it is the capacity to endure. In community and international development studies, concern over sustainability has been around for over 30 years, although it did not become the popular and urgent topic that it is until after the 1992 U.N. Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro. In doing a Proquest search, out of 137,000 documents I found on both sustainability and development, the earliest source was a 1979 article in *The Futurist* magazine on “basic human needs and sustainable growth.” But the topic of course goes back even further as it was a central theme of the U.N. Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972. And from the beginning, sustainability was understood as being multi-dimensional-- as both an economic and an environmental challenge. The idea that sustainability is also inherently a social and cultural phenomenon came later, but that has never received the same attention as economic or environmental factors, although it is where my own research most overlaps with this field.

So we have the ”3 pillars" of social, environmental & economic sustainability as discussed at the “Renowned Thinkers Meeting” organized in Zurich a few years ago by the World Conservation Union. (As an aside, I’m just curious, were any of you “renowned thinkers” invited to that meeting? I think my own invitation must have gotten lost somehow. I did notice that Vanderbilt’s own Nobel Laureate Muhammed Yunus attended which makes me feel a little better about the group.)

What I have questions about in this ven diagram are the three areas marked “equitable, bearable, and viable.” I can see that economic growth may be socially equitable, but if it is ecologically damaging, it is not sustainable. And I suppose that development in the social sphere of health, education, equality, etc. can go better than just bearably with environmental protection, but if it is economically too draining it may be unsustainable. But I do not think that economic development can “viably” occur that is environmentally sustainable but not socially and culturally supported and sustaining. As usual in development circles, I think the social realm is getting short shrift and I think this represents a fundamental misunderstanding of social sustainability as merely benefiting people equitably. It means more than that, as I will try to show.

[SLIDE 15: Ecological Framework for CD figure from Perkins et al, 2004]

Since first reading about sustainability about 15 years ago and applying it to my work on community development, I have argued that there are, in fact, at least 4 important kinds, just as there are 4 areas of development or forms of capital as depicted in this comprehensive, ecological framework for community development from a chapter I published in 2004: so here are our 3 familiar pillars of economic, physical environmental, and social sustainability; but also political sustainability. Let me define each of the four.

First, environmental sustainability-- in ecology, the word sustainability describes how biological systems remain diverse and productive over time. As defined by the National Science Foundation, it is about the promotion of [and I QUOTE] “sustainable engineered systems that support human well-being and that are also compatible with sustaining natural (environmental) systems (that) provide ecological services vital for human survival. Research in Environmental Sustainability typically considers long time horizons and may incorporate contributions from the social sciences and ethics…that seek to balance society's need to provide ecological protection and maintain stable economic conditions” (<http://www.nsf.gov/funding/pgm_summ.jsp?pims_id=501027> ). So the NSF is apparently attuned at least to the relevance of economics and other social sciences to environmental sustainability, although unsurprisingly they too ignore my 4th pillar of political sustainability.

Economic sustainability at the macro level is the goal of achieving steady economic growth in developed countries and economic development in less developed countries without the need for repeated infusions of cash and other financial assistance. This has been of particular concern to large development financiers, such as the World Bank and the IMF, although the way they operate does not always seem to lend itself very well to even economic sustainability, let alone to environmental, social, or political sustainability. But I’m no economist, so I may simply not understand mysteries in their methods.

Economic sustainability at the micro level is the need to price the cost of green goods and services at a level that is affordable to consumers. The economic pillar of sustainability may be the biggest challenge in these times of fiscal restraint and tight budgets.

Socio-cultural sustainability certainly includes development or technologies that treat and benefit individuals and groups equitably, as I noted, especially in terms of access to basic resources of food, shelter, health, and education. But it is really more the idea that environmental and economic sustainability are both largely dependent on human cultural values and social norms, or desires, attitudes, emotions, and behaviors. If a green invention is something people will not buy or use, no matter the cost, it is not socially sustainable. And if a particular green movement or campaign does not draw and maintain large numbers of supporters or adopters and local advocates, then it too is not socially sustainable.

So what then do I mean by “political sustainability?” That is simply the notion that ecological technologies, interventions and movements often require political support both at the level of policy-makers, and not just in government, but also corporate decision-makers, and also at the local level of voters and environmental organization and coalition organizers and participants. Energy and environmental resource regulations that are not politically “winnable”, let alone sustainable, in China may be manageable here in the U.S.,…at least until the next election. The recent midterm vote was a vivid reminder, if one was needed, that political sustainability can be exceedingly difficult to achieve, but with grassroots support and enough momentum, big changes are not only possible, with legislative gridlock and legal and bureaucratic delays working in your favor for a change, they are sometimes even sustainable.

So now let me finally turn to what I know a little more about first-hand, having taught community service and community participatory action research courses for over 20 years, and that is service-learning and civic education. Before I leave this slide, however, I will argue that what I characterize here as the “larger scale public policy role” of community development, represented in the left-hand column, is analogous in some ways to civic education for sustainable development and the “smaller scale citizen/community role,” represented in the middle column, is analogous to service-learning for sustainable development. Both have an important role to play, but I want to encourage you all today to think beyond just traditional service-learning projects that get students to work on environmental impact mitigation projects, or what we might call 1st-order change, amelioration, or direct services. The reason I titled this address “Forms of Sustainability and Levels of Civic Education and Change: Beyond Service-Learning,” and why I have emphasized the importance of social equity, cultural values and social behavior, and especially the ignored fourth pillar of sustainability which is political, is that I want to challenge you to develop and implement civic education projects for sustainability that teach students about critical political dynamics, structures, processes and decisions from the grassroots to council chambers to board rooms to the state house to the mayor’s and governor’s offices. It is those dynamics, structures, processes and decisions that ultimately determine whether technological innovations and interventions and ecological policies get funded and developed and how they are regulated.

[SLIDE 16:]

But first: What is Service-learning?

**It is** “a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities.”

Key features of service-learning done correctly are that projects must address a real community need and the value for partners should meet or exceed their costs in staff time and other resources devoted to training, supervision, research and evaluation, etc.

And they must connect real learning to the service experience and allow opportunities for both individual and group reflection and for adequate supervision.

Whether you call it service-learning or civic education, it is something that has been a frequent struggle for me, but ultimately a rewarding one I think for both students and partners.

[SLIDE 17: SERVICE-LEARNING CHALLENGES]

Challenges include the time and effort it takes to develop partner relationships and trust, to plan, conduct, supervise, report, disseminate, and follow-up on student projects to ensure the implementation and sustainability of whatever changes or recommendations resulted from the projects; and the challenge of covering enough traditional course information in a 2 and a half hour per week, 15 week course while also completing a meaningful and worthwhile service project, let alone a civic education and change project that has any real and lasting impact. Finally, service-learning may not be advisable for pre-tenure faculty at institutions that value entertaining over challenging students or value research over teaching, unless you can manage to tie service-learning projects very closely to your research which is possible and an ideal kind of marriage. The empirical results of service-learning projects, if there are any, are also usually case studies, program evaluations, or needs assessments that are difficult to publish. And yet I still say it is worth struggling with all of those challenges.

Fortunately for those of us at Peabody, we have great service-learning expertise and experience in my faculty colleagues Janet Eyler, Sharon Shields, and others; and all Vanderbilt faculty and grad students have tremendous resources in Alison Pingree, Joe Bandy, and the other Center for Teaching staff. And all of us in this room have access to state and national service-learning resources, such as Campus Compact.

[SLIDE 18: Community organizational learning: Case studies illustrating a 3-dimensional model of levels and orders of change]

So how does civic education differ from service learning? I will use the first study I conducted when I moved to Tennessee and did partly as a funded study and partly as a series of undergraduate and graduate class projects to illustrate the differences, although those projects were not themselves what I would consider either service-learning or civic education**.** We were studying learning at the individual and organizational levels in community-based nonprofit organizations and voluntary associations in Nashville. And we distinguished between 1st and 2nd-order change at those same levels as well as the community level, which is the level at which civic education and political sustainability are most relevant. It is this distinction between incremental and transformative or systems-level change that reflects the difference between service-learning and civic education. **[GO OVER SLIDES 18-20]**

1st-order change: effects just part of system vs.

2nd-order change: systems-level change in the basic goals, structure or processes of the org.

[SLIDE 21: Building Sustainable Partnerships: Collaborative Action Model]

Whether you do civic education or prefer to stick with service-learning, another kind of sustainability that is important is building sustainable partnerships. This model was from the next study I conducted with Isaac Prilleltensky and some grad students. In contrast with the last study, as a participatory action research project, this one was more like civic education, but unfortunately, we did not use the courses we taught very much in this project.

Why do you need community-based partners? Some of you may conduct campus sustainability projects, which can be great and they allow students, faculty, and institutions to put their own house in order first & can provide a kind of laboratory for change & sustainability. But ultimately it is important for students to be exposed to, & practice on, problems & forces in the real world outside our ivy-covered walls and “Vandybubbles.”

By approaching our partner organizations on a co-equal basis and helping them engage in empowering organizational change, and providing useful expertise and information, we hoped to build a close and lasting relationship. That worked well in some organizations and not so well in others. One thing it might be good for one or more of the workshops to talk about today is developing sustainable service-learning partnerships with communities, agencies, and governments.

[SLIDE 22: MAIN FEATURES OF AMELIORATIVE & TRANSFORMATIVE PARADIGM]

This table from that same article differentiates the ameliorative or 1st-order change and transformative or 2nd-order change paradigms, which again, parallel many of the differences between service-learning and civic education, respectively. As you can see, the problem tends to be defined differently in each paradigm, as a matter of individual behavior change in the ameliorative paradigm versus a structural, systemic, or community or societal-level problem in the transformative paradigm, it is necessary for students and educators to think about sustainability problems and solutions differently in civic education, including as a political matter in which certain individuals and groups are oppressed in ways that may contribute to environmental unsustainability. And so the project becomes one focusing on identifying such groups and sources of their oppression, and on helping to liberate or empower them toward a goal of environmental wellness for everyone.

[SLIDES 23-26 Comprehensive Ecological Model for Analyzing Power Dynamics across 4 Forms of Sustainability & 3 Levels (adapted from Christens & Perkins, 2008)]:

I therefore offer this 3-dimensional framework from an article my former student Brian Christens and I wrote in response to a paper by my former Peabody colleague Isaac Prilleltensky. I offer it as a possible guiding framework for thinking about planning civic education or service-learning projects for sustainability at different levels and different stages of the empowerment process and how the physical or natural environmental level is connected to and influenced by the sociocultural, economic, and political forms of sustainability and capital. [GO OVER SLIDES 23-26]

The first dimension of the framework examines oppression, liberation, and wellness as stages of empowerment-- a dynamic process over time. The goal is to identify sources of oppression and help oppressed groups become liberated which leads to social, material, physical, and spiritual wellness. Theories, research, and practices in human, organizational and community development may be useful.

The second dimension includes the various levels of analysis and intervention, including the individual psycho-behavioral and micro-system, the group/organizational and meso-system, and the community/societal or exo- and macro-system levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The 3rd dimension encompasses 4 environmental or substantive domains that are all essential for understanding the ecology of oppression, liberation, and wellness. It is these environmental domains which most clearly imply a need for transdisciplinary research to adequately understand the economic, political, socio-cultural, and physical environmental contexts of community disadvantage, power, and wellness at each level and stage.

This framework has been used in a proposal for an international research network on power dynamics in community settings across these same levels and domains. We posed the following questions for each stage (or column) of the process:

[SLIDE 24:] Think about your research and/or intervention interests or a (service learning or civic ed. project you might plan & consider the following…

***Questions related to oppression which)*** need to be repeated for each of the 3 levels of analysis and can be applied to any one of the 4 environmental domains…

What are the **power relations** present at the macro, meso, and micro levels of analysis? Who are the players in the relationship? There may be multiple relationships at play. Some players may be oppressors in one setting and oppressed in others.

What **exchanges** take place over time among the various players at the various levels?...

What are the **consequences** of these power relations at the various levels of analysis?...

[SLIDE 25:] ***Questions related to liberation/empowerment:***

We are conceptualizing **liberation and empowerment as a process.** This process may be naturally occurring in the environment, without external intervention, or it may be the result of a planned intervention.

 1. What **strategies** are being implemented at each level of analysis to change the oppressive power relations?...

2. What **inhibiting** and **facilitative** factors influence the strategies and change processes discussed in question 1 above?... What kinds of conditions enable people and groups to resist? What circumstances block the development of consciousness and empowerment actions?

3. What **tactics** are used to strengthen the facilitative factors and to reduce the inhibiting factors?...

[SLIDE 26:] ***Questions related to wellness***

We are conceptualizing wellness as an **outcome.**

What was the **ideal** **outcome** of your overall strategies in terms of power relations?...

What was the **expected** **immediate** outcome of your tactics in terms of power relations?...

What were the **obtained** or **actual** outcomes of your tactics in terms of power relations?...

How do you **explain** the outcomes? How do you explain potential gaps between actual and ideal or expected outcomes? What is your theory for explaining how wellness is or is not achieved at the various levels of analysis? Is it possible that wellness is easier to achieve at the lower levels of analysis than at higher levels? How does power equalization affect wellness at various levels of analysis?

Focusing systematically on economic, political, physical, and social forms of both capital and oppression across the different levels and stages of development leads to different questions than engineers and scientists, even social scientists, are generally equipped to answer. They are questions that address causes of, and solutions to, systemic and structural problems in the environment. They help to identify and develop capacities at multiple levels.

**[SLIDES 27-34:]**

**I will conclude now with a couple examples of how one might address the problems I started with-- of unsustainable sprawling urban and suburban development in Tennessee through civic education projects.**

[SLIDE 35: SUMMARY & CONCLUSIONS]  
In closing, I hope I have gotten you to think a little more broadly about both service-learning and sustainability.  In particular, I have argued that while your focus may be primarily on environmental sustainability, and that is both understandable and important, economic, socio-cultural, and political sustainability are also essential. In particular, the ideas of socio-cultural and political sustainability are where a broader definition of service-learning can be very useful. I have suggested that a better term for what is needed is “civic education,” since for most people, I think service learning connotes sending students into the community to volunteer to assist direct social services, or in the case of environmental concerns, to do ecological sustainability and environmental science projects of various kinds.  Those may be very helpful as both learning and performing a needed service, although I suspect they tend to be stronger on learning than on the needed service part.  In contrast, while civic education may include such projects to test new ways to ameliorate ecological problems through various “first-order” change or improvement efforts, civic ed helps students go beyond ameliorative service to think about and begin to address problems at their systemic political, economic, and sociocultural root causes.  And so a sustainability civic education project may include not only learning how buildings can be LEED-certified and what that means and assisting a campus or other developer who already wants to build greener; or how to make cars, trucks and buses run cleaner and more efficiently, but civic education for sustainability should also mean learning what all the economic, political, cultural, and socio-behavioral barriers are to making green building and green transportation a reality for everyone.  That must include working directly with political and social systems at both the grassroots level as well as at the levels in which corporate and public policy decisions are made. And our students will not learn those things effectively until we too are willing to become at least competent jacks, if not masters, of those trades.

Sources

Adams, W. M. (2006). *The Future of Sustainability: Re-thinking Environment and Development in the 21st Century: Report of IUCN Renowned Thinkers Meeting*. World Conservation Union.

Calthorpe, P. (1993). *The next American metropolis: Ecology, community and the American dream.*

Calthorpe, P., & Fulton, W. (2001). *The regional city: Planning for the end of sprawl.* Island Press.

Christens, B., & Perkins, D.D. (2008). Transdisciplinary, multilevel action research to enhance ecological and psycho-political validity. *Journal of Community Psychology, 36*, 214-231.

Evans, S. D., Hanlin, C. E., & Prilleltensky, I. (2007). Blending ameliorative and transformative approaches in human service organizations: A case study. *Journal of Community Psychology, 35*(3), 329–346.

McHale, J., & McHale, M. C. (1979). Basic Human Needs and Sustainable Growth. *The Futurist, 13*(1), 13

Perkins, D.D., Bess, K., Cooper, D.G., Jones, D. Armstead, T., & Speer, P.W. (2007). Community organizational learning: Case studies illustrating a three-dimensional model of levels and orders of change. *Journal of Community Psychology, 35*, 307-332.

Perkins, D. D., Crim, B., Silberman, P., & Brown, B. B. (2004). Community development as a response to community-level adversity: Ecological theory and research and strengths-based policy. In K. Maton, C. Schellenbach, B. Leadbeater & A. Solarz (Eds.), *Investing in children, youth, families, and communities: Strengths based research and policy* (pp. 321-340). APA.