Building Playgrounds, Engaging Communities: Creating Safe and Happy Places for Children.
Marybeth Lima. Louisiana State University Press. 183 pages.


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Building Playgrounds, Engaging Communities is a bit deceptive as a title for this treasure of a guide book for faculty or staff seeking to engage with community. Although the title is accurate in that the book uses the lessons learned from years of community engagement through design and construction of playgrounds in the Baton Rouge community, the book’s 180 pages serve as a joyous account of how the author works to find the “soul of the community” within which she works before and during any collaborative project. This is a book about community design process done well. Not without setbacks, as author Marybeth Lima is quick to assert, but the book provides a host of strategies for reciprocity in community-university partnerships and problem solving techniques that serve us well regardless of our disciplinary lens or project focus.

Marybeth Lima’s story is one of authentic leadership within the sphere of university-community partnerships and within a field dominated by men (Biological Engineering). She has led the charge with passion and integrity since 1997 – before engagement was in vogue with institutions of higher education and earning our schools national awards and recognition. Lima’s stories of community building within the many examples of collaboration offer wisdom, humility, humor, and inspiration. Lima manages to make that wisdom accessible and relevant equally to those of us who “aspire” to create community and to those of us having committed to doing so for years. The style, content, and structure of the book addresses the greatest challenge within most collaborations: creating reciprocity within partnerships. Lima offers a “how to” for what Parker Palmer (2000), noted writer, teacher and activist confesses as difficult to accomplish. He writes,
Marybeth Lima walks us deftly through this intricate dance of how to find, create and respond to community as she and her students discover the soul of each community by becoming part of it.

Lima has divided the book into two main sections. Within the first section, beginning with the Prologue, the first person perspective grants the reader not only a glimpse of the author’s vibrancy, but also clear insight into the author’s philosophy of teaching. Throughout the book, the informal style, mix of humility and humor generously sprinkled with wisdom keeps the stories compelling and relevant. She gently parodies herself and traditional instruction with the words, “I brought a huge dose of earnestness (Midwesterners have the market cornered on earnestness) and a burning desire to transform engineering education from the production of highly skilled barbarians to the creation of holistic problem solvers” (ix).

The first four chapters that make up the first section of the book contain the collective stories of people and communities with whom Lima and her students have worked since 1999. Within each chapter, the author has chosen stories that capture lessons learned for important topics encountered by any community engaged course: pedagogy, funding, stakeholders, collaboration, rules of the game, and the sometimes unrealistic expectations of students and community. In chapter one, “How to Fit a Playground through the Back Door,” Lima highlights the liberating nature of teaching through service-learning. She clarifies the use of service-learning engagement to guide students in “how to learn” in contrast to engagement for the “how to” delivery of the disciplinary content. Lima examines how community engagement assignments motivated students to move beyond “good enough,” to “great” work. She writes at completion of her students’ first playground and observing the school children’s reaction,

Watching those kids attack the Beechwood playground that they had had a hand in designing evoked a feeling like none I had ever had. It wasn’t about pride, though I was proud of the work...it was the knowledge that every person involved in the playground project gave something to the community, and that something would keep on giving for as long as the playground lives. (p.12)

The Beechwood playground project was 25 playgrounds ago and throughout the book Lima often speaks of what she has learned from others in her years of collaboration. In Chapter one she brings to light how her original good intention for positive outcomes for her students has evolved into an intentional process that brings positive outcomes for all.
"You Can’t Make a Playground Gumbo without the Ladies,” Chapter 2, invites us into the secret of a good design process for any project. “The secret to good playground design – and really any kind of design– is knowing, understanding, and embracing the people who will use it” (p. 18). Thus begins the chapter’s discussion of the roles, responsibilities, and the nuanced interplay of mutual accountability among the diverse stakeholders within any collaboration. Chapter 3, “Playgrounds Rule and Playground Rules” provides stories that flesh out six essential principles of any successful university-community collaboration. The rules, perhaps the book in its entirety, might help answer the question, “What can we do together that we can’t do alone?” She writes about the magic when it all comes together to bring to life an integration of the actual and the ideal. “There is something absolutely synergistic about the process of transforming hopes and dreams from ideas into physical form” (p. 37). Not all of us are engineers, but many of us in our dealings with community partners, students and other interested parties, are treading lightly because in our interactions, we tread on hopes and dreams. In the culminating chapter of the part one, “Triumphing over Murphy’s Law on Steroids” Lima broaches the dreaded subject of setbacks and frustrations. The search for funding (and how never to accept “No”) is as inspiring as it is creative. Also helpful is the insight as to how to find inspiration to persevere in spite of having to look a 5th grader in the eye and say “We’re still working on it” and mean it, when you know she was a kindergartener when you started.

The second section of the book, Chapter 5 through 7 and the Epilogue, shifts gears to focus on larger issues involving community collaborations and change agency. It is within these chapters that Lima delves deeper into the concept of needing to understand the soul of any community within which you will become a partner. In Chapter 5, “Community Stone Soup,” Lima describes a subtle and powerful learning process, “The Other Side of Simple” (my name for the process), as well as anyone I have encountered. This learning process is a common one, frequently encountered in engaged pedagogies, and a difficult one to break into discrete elements. She begins with setting the context of this learning process. She writes, “It is difficult to explain to students what it’s like when you finally ‘get’ the soul of the community, because when you do, there is no longer any need to ask. The community has stopped being ‘them’ and has become ‘us’” (p. 89).

Students begin with the “simple.”

*When my students take the playground design class they undertake the fairly straightforward process of learning playground safety standards and playground design...[then move to “complex”] the somewhat less straightforward process of learning to communicate with disparate groups of people with different interests and needs, and the difficult process of trying to grasp the soul of the community. The latter involves examining assumptions and learning the difference between serving and helping; it can lead to uncomfortable moments, conversations and revelations. It is an elusive thing, the soul of the community, partly because you have to find your way within the community, but also because you have to find your way within yourself.* (91)
And Lima observes the student’s breakthrough back to the “simple.”

In their search for the soul of the community, my students usually come to the conclusion that on some level, us=them. At that moment and beyond, there is a level of ownership, togetherness, and responsibility that leads my students to the conclusion that community matters, and people matter too. (97)

Chapter 6 offers “A Brief Survival Guide for Community Engagement Marathons,” in particular a helpful (and practical) discourse on the value of failure, how to learn from and move on from mistakes and how to create alternative routes to major roadblocks. Lima wraps up her treatise on lessons learned with a chapter on “Getting Involved: Advice from Community Fire Plugs.” She invited community members to partner with her on offering a basic primer to anyone who aspires to become an engaged citizen. The suggestions are clear, practical, and appropriate for novices and experts alike. Lima includes two Appendices at the end of her book, one on playground safety because it’s become her passion, and the second, a brief guide of resources for volunteering in locally, state-wide, national and international arenas. The author ends with a proffered gift of her version of “This I Believe.” The gift is offered with all of the vulnerability and courage as the rest of the book. “Life in Louisiana has taught me that success is not about the ultimate outcome of a journey or struggle, it’s about navigating the process. And it’s taught me that sea change can and does occur through ordinary human effort and not extraordinary superhuman accomplishment” (p.158). Marybeth Lima has generously shared an extraordinary design for navigating the process of partnerships.

References


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