Introduction
Reflection on action (Schon, 1983) or reflective practice (Raelin, 2001) is a powerful process for allowing people to become aware of the knowledge embedded in their actions, but it can also be used to drive a learning process that examines and extends that knowledge and potentially transforms the thinking about those actions. In the social justice field, particularly at the grassroots community level, practitioners often work within highly evolved frameworks of knowledge and theory, but those frameworks are frequently tacit, lying beneath the surface of action. Given the urgent and resource-strapped conditions surrounding community social justice work, there are few opportunities for practitioners to examine their action, to articulate the thinking that propelled it, or to realize consciously the learning and knowledge that emerged from it.

However, in community social justice work, learning and knowledge building are arguably among the most important forms of action. In order to adapt to constantly changing and complex political and social realities, activists need to integrate learning from their experience back into their practice and be able to fine-tune the assumptions and theories that drive their work. In addition, social justice as a field is impoverished when it comes to transferring the learning that comes out of practice and building knowledge to inform policy, professional education, and research on public participation (Mott, personal communication). Without a methodology and practice for working with practitioners to name, examine, and connect the learning that has arisen from their action and experience, a great deal of knowledge is lost because it is not articulated, recorded, and shared.

This paper describes a collective reflective learning process conducted with members of five community-based organizations for the purpose of generating and documenting their learning from their work. In this analysis, we were interested in examining the mechanics of the process itself. Given that participants reported that they gained valuable learning through the process, how does it work to produce learning? What kinds of learning seem to result? What role do questions, stories, and dialogue have in shaping the process?

The Race & Democracy Reflection Project
In 2001, MIT’s Center for Reflective Community Practice developed a Practitioner Knowledge Initiative to build knowledge and theory from community practice while expanding access to and broadening the scope of that growing body of information. The initiative was built on the assumption that people who work for social justice in struggling communities, through their
everyday experiences, are dynamically constructing knowledge essential to strengthening those communities. The goal of the Practitioner Knowledge Initiative is to create techniques designed to systematically uncover knowledge from community practice, to build bodies of compelling learning covering critical topics across the field of social justice, and to make that knowledge available to all who are working toward positive social change.

A total of fifty individuals were involved from five organizations, whose work focused on building democratic participation in a way that addressed exclusion of marginalized groups. The organizations were located in different geographic regions of the US (northeast, south, southwest, west) and varied in the issues and groups they were working with. The aim of the reflection process was threefold. First, we sought to document the particular nature of community organizing work within varied contexts and approaches, especially where there was explicit attention to inclusion and voice of marginalized groups. Second, by analyzing stories about this work, we hoped to help organizers to externalize the knowledge and theories underlying their practice (and thus work toward creating a sharable repository of practitioner-based knowledge). Finally, we wanted to support participants in identifying questions critical to advancing their practice and their thinking about their practice, and bringing those questions to bear on the analysis of their experience.

The method for addressing these three goals utilized a combination of specific reflection techniques, primarily reflection on significant moments (Maini and Nordbeck, 1973), inquiry-based reflection (development of inquiry questions and their application to narrative accounts), and collective dialogue (Bohm, 1985). In addition, the process in which these reflection techniques were embedded was highly participatory from the design stage through the implementation stage, and thus highly adapted to the specific culture and context of each organization’s work. We worked with each organization to design the focus and structure of their reflection session over several months. These intensive reflection sessions for each organization were two to three days long and involved between four and twenty five participants depending on the size and structure of the organization. Following the individual reflection sessions for the five organizations, there were two cross-site sessions that brought together representatives from each organization. All of these sessions were recorded, including the planning sessions, with the understanding that participants would be the decision-makers about what material could be included for a particular use of the material.

The primary outcomes of the reflection and documentation effort were the (a) recording of a sizable body of stories and analysis of the practice of building participation at the community level in education reform, political process, urban planning, labor reform, and immigrant policymaking, and (b) significant learning and transformation reported at the individual and organizational level as a result of formulating inquiry questions and using them to drive the analysis of action and thinking (i.e., reflective learning). Our continuing work with the reflection material from this process has a primary goal of disseminating the practitioner knowledge into the field of community building.

**Critical Moments Reflection**

Reflective learning generates an interlinked network of stories that function as “data” in a systematic inquiry process – not free-floating anecdotes but a purposefully selected set of experiences subjected to careful analysis. Similarly, the discussion of those stories is aimed
specifically at interrogating them and building a cohesive analysis across them. This methodology builds important knowledge resources related to the community-building field while also supporting and encouraging practitioners to continue to innovate and advance their own work.

The reflective learning process begins with the members of the group naming those moments that they experienced as significant within a particular area of the work. The contrast in the set of moments that are experienced as most significant from the perspective of different people in the work is often very powerful. The next step is for the group to narrow down to a subset of critical moments, choosing several to examine in depth. This decision is based on which moments will produce the learning that is most related to the urgent issues in their work.

For the selected critical moments, the story of each moment is told collectively by those involved, followed by a collective analysis of the moment – what shifted, why, what led to the moment, what happened as a result. Through analysis, the meaning of the moment to those who experienced it is identified and explored. The goal of the analysis is to become aware of the reason that particular moments were experienced as significant, and to examine the nature of their significance. This allows the learning from the experience of doing the work to be surfaced, and often reveals deeper or additional questions. In particular, the questions that are driving the development of the work can become much clearer. The process can go through a number of iterations of identifying current issues or questions, selecting critical moments related to those issues or questions, and analyzing those critical moments with the greatest potential to produce learning.

In this project, the elements of the reflection process were similar for the five organizations, though the process took a unique form for each. These common elements included:

- A set of initial questions that framed the focus, purpose and scope of the learning the organization wished to address.
- Identification of the areas of work most relevant to explore in the reflection process.
- The use of critical moments reflection to catalog and explore the most significant moments in these areas of work.
- Analysis of selected critical moments aimed at identifying and elaborating the learning from each moment.
- A return to the initial questions to develop insights based on the learning generated by the critical moments process.
- Identification of the “learning-edge questions” identified through the reflection process. Learning-edge questions captured the needs for learning that each organization felt most urgent for advancing their work.

Profiles of transformational learning
In the following sections we present profiles from the reflective learning process for each of two organizations. To build the profiles, we categorized each segment of the dialogue during the reflection process by the type of element it contributed to the process. Themes were segments of dialogue that focused on naming or stating a major topic for potential discussion. Questions were those questions that named a direction of inquiry (i.e., not including rhetorical or conversational questions). Dialogue refers to stretches of dialogue addressing a particular
concern or issue. Stories told about specific events. Insights were segments where a new idea or connection was named.

The profiles create a focus on the sequential flow of different elements within the dialogue process. They also show the relationships between elements, for example, when a story catalyzes new questions, or when a particular dialogue sequence spawns both a question and additional streams of dialogue. A closer examination of the profiles shows the particular character of the reflective learning process in each of the two organizations. It also provides provisional answers to the research questions we started with concerning the role of different types of elements within the reflection process and the kind of learning that results.

Beloved Community Center: Generating a Rich Set of Questions from an Initial Theme

The mission of the Beloved Community Center is to foster and model a spirit of community based on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s vision of a “beloved community,” the belief that true change can happen by bringing together a critical mass of people trained to work together in nonviolence and inclusion. This diagram of a specific segment of the process during their reflection session demonstrates how the reflection process can move participants from a general question, concern, or theme to articulating a host of important issues at the core of their work through dialogue, questions, and stories. Through this collective process, participants were able to take apart the various layers of their initial concern and then analyze each component in its own right. The diagram emphasizes the progression in meaning during the conversation rather than its temporal flow.

Prior to the conversation featured in this diagram, the participants had named the issue of institution building as a significant concern in their work and discussed it briefly. The next day, they launched the conversation with Question 1: “What kinds of institutions can we create that would service the particular nature and character of the movement we’re trying to build?”

After a period of dialogue, the participants focused on the challenge of reconciling institution building and grassroots-organizing work (Theme 2). This discussion then led them to explore some of the concrete, practical issues they have faced in their work with regard to this challenge (left branch of the diagram), while also addressing deeper structural concerns, such as their organizational philosophy (right branch of the diagram).

In the right branch of the diagram, following one of the participant’s remarks on the need for a distinction between institution building and administration or management of the organization (Dialogue 6), the dialogue moved towards an exploration of the BCC’s past, current, and future institutionalization processes. The members of the group then explored the direction that the organization’s work was taking and, through dialogue around these issues, generated the themes of prioritizing and of capacity (Dialogue 9, Dialogue 10, Question 4). The exploration of one particular participant’s experience—of simultaneously working on the institutional aspect of the work while engaging in grassroots organizing—then generated dialogue around capacity (Dialogue 11). This ultimately led to the realization that in order to better deal with capacity issues, the Beloved Community Center needs to reflect more as an organization. Other themes were briefly discussed throughout the process, notably the fear of institutionalization (Dialogue 1, Dialogue 13).
Figure 1. Diagram of Reflection Process Elements for Beloved Community Center

**Theme 1**
Institution building

**Question 1**
What kinds of institutions ought we build and can we build that would service the particular nature and character of the movement we’re trying to build?

**Dialogue 1**
Fear of getting too far from the work by becoming institutionalized

**Theme 2**
Reconciling institution-building and grassroots organizing work

**Dialogue 2**
Split between people doing administrative work and those organizing

**Dialogue 3**
Importance of the institutional aspect of the work

**Dialogue 4**
Designating the appropriate people for certain tasks; accountability

**Dialogue 5**
Importance of having people involved to some extent in both aspects of the work

**Dialogue 6**
Important to distinguish administration and management from institution building

**Question 2**
What have we gotten to be and what are we becoming?

**Dialogue 7**
Institutionalizing as propagating information about BCC; community building

**Dialogue 8**
Institutionalizing BCC’s activities

**Question 3**
What are the main blocks to strengthening the institution?

**Dialogue 9**
Institutionalizing as a means of expanding rather than restricting capacity

**Story**
Brown Bag Lunch Forum: Example of institutionalizing BCC’s activities
Texas LEADS: Creating Shared Thinking Through Reflection
The reflective learning session for the Texas LEADS Project was made up of four different people who each brought a unique perspective to developing parent involvement and leadership for effecting educational reform and holding public schools accountable to the community. As the initiator of the project, Gerald drove the overarching thinking of the purpose, philosophy, and goals. Leslie led the development of the methodology by holding the philosophy of participatory engagement, and coordinated the program activities. Leslie also worked to ensure that LEADS maintained enough of an outsider status to keep the school accountable. As the first school-based parent-involvement coordinator and long-time resident (and former parent) within the community, Ray brought the struggles and complexities of the work that he experienced being immersed in the school and in the lives of the parents. Lupe, who more recently joined LEADS and held active roles as both parent and staff, had a perspective similar
to Ray’s with the added outlook of witnessing the use of the LEADS model created at the original school site, as she worked to replicate it at a second school.

The LEADS profile provides an example of how a reflection process can help the members of a group move from initially individual perspectives on how to approach their work, to an integration of their thinking within a shared view of how the work needs to progress. The process began with the sharing of each person’s perspective on critical moments in the work to date. The critical-moments activity brought out each individual perspective and influenced the members of the group to think more deeply about their own perspectives by hearing the differences among them. The diagram demonstrates that a shared story (Story 4, about the postponed translation of a bilingual Parent Survival Guide) allowed them to bring their thinking together as they probed a key issue in their work: the tension between LEADS’ methodology and that of the school. As the staff told the story, the facilitators asked questions aimed at getting the LEADS staff to make explicit their strategy of making decisions and choices in their day-to-day work, particularly around balancing their dual roles of supporting and yet also reforming the schools in which they work.

The story of the bilingual Parent Survival Guide led to the formulation of a question (Question 1) related to making conscious decisions about tasks that support LEADS’ mission versus those that just get something done for the school. Through a period of dialogue (Dialogue 5) about how LEADS builds parent engagement even in completing tasks for the school, the group generated an insight and a new question. The diagram shows how the question (Question 2), concerning the boundaries for how much “inside” work for the school creates an imbalance for LEADS’ participants in their role as outside change agent, produced a flow of dialogue, question-asking, and another period of dialogue. This sequence led to a key insight about the role of parent participation in creating a sense of ownership of the school by parents.

As a result of their reflection session, the LEADS staff formulated a question that spoke to the current learning edge in their work: “As outsiders seeking to promote change while working inside the school system, when are we focused on the change we want (developing parent leadership and meaningful participation) and when are we just part of the system (providing services for parents or the school)?” At the cross-site gathering of all five Race, Policy, and Democracy groups, the LEADS staff shared this question, along with stories from their work, then engaged questions and dialogue offered by the other groups before reconvening to revisit their learning-edge question. Based on this process, they framed a set of insights clarifying how to move their work forward while describing a new, shared understanding of the key issues.

This case illustrates how stories, questions, and dialogue function as “cogs” in the reflection-process “machine,” moving it forward and yielding the products of deeper questions and insights. It is clear how the process both created documentation of the key moments in the work as well as producing learning that can be converted into improvements of everyday practice. For this particular group of participants, the process had the added benefit of integrating and yet retaining the complexity of their unique perspectives from the vantage point of their different roles in the work.
Figure 2. Reflection Process Diagram for Texas LEADS Project

- **RAY/LUPE**
  - **DIALOGUE 1**: Challenge of balancing own role as parent from community vs LEADS staff

- **DIALOGUE 2**: Sees LEADS driving a parent involvement program

- **DIALOGUE 3**: Too far inside system: Easily caught up in School related tasks

- **STORY 1**: Undocumented work: As they try to involve disconnected parents, come across survival needs before they can address involvement

- **STORY 2**: Action plan: Surprised at the amount of facilitation required to develop parent leadership

- **STORY 3**: School projects: Does not want LEADS to be too far inside the system, which pulls/keeps parents in traditional roles

- **STORY 4**: Bilingual Parent Survival Guide: Struggle in taking on school-related tasks in order to assure the philosophy of LEADS is reflected in the school system.

- **GESALD**
  - **DIALOGUE 4**: Wants LEADS to be parent-driven with LEADS focusing on developing parent leadership

- **DIALOGUE 5**: The reality is that it is often the only way projects will get done, but LEADS undertakes them in ways that builds parent leadership

- **DIALOGUE 8**: Wants to institutionalize LEADS within the school to change the system

- **DIALOGUE 9**: Recognizes that an organization (LEADS) can train parents to assure the accountability of an institution/school

- **DIALOGUE 10**: Critical for LEADS to adapt to school culture; doesn’t negate replicability

- **LESLEY**
  - **DIALOGUE 7**: Sees racial inequities at the University level; Hopwood Decision

- **QUESTION 1**: When is it a conscious decision by LEADS to undertake school-related tasks and when is it because it’s the only way it will get done?

- **QUESTION 2**: How much is too much work for the school?

- **INSIGHT 1**: Creating a policy to ensure consistent and equal communications with parents will be effective and replicable
DIALOGUE 6
Brings in insider/outside issue; working is a way to get into the school

QUESTION 3
Does it matter how you bring parents into the school?

DIALOGUE 7
Exploration of the various levels of involvement

INSIGHT 2
Parent involvement becomes meaningful when it creates ownership in the school

LEARNING EDGE QUESTION
As outsiders seeking to promote change while working inside the school system, when are we focused on the change we want and when are we just part of the system?

After exploring these questions within their organization, Texas LEADS joined four other organizations to reflect on their work. After presenting the story of their work, meeting in cross-site groups and reconvening with each other they presented the following conclusions:

INSIGHT 3
Need to formalize parent training and methodology for replicability. Necessary to be “inside” the school for functionality/acceptance. Must remain “outside” of the school for accountability. Methodology: Facilitate parents as a way to gradually foster independent action and ownership of the schools.


**Discussion**

What did we learn by doing this close examination of the progression of the reflection process? In terms of the role that each type of element played within the process of reflective learning, we learned that *stories* provided a basis for dialogue—exploring and connecting the meanings of events, or the challenges, questions, and issues that were raised by those events. In contrast, *questions* usually provided an initial frame of inquiry, or crystallize an issue or challenge. *Dialogue* helped explore, deepen, and focus the group’s understanding of events and their significance. Dialogue also helped connect this new understanding to underlying goals and principles, which provoked *insights* about how the work was serving those goals and principles.

Working together, these elements formed the particular character of each organizations reflective learning process. Stories, questions, and dialogue each played a different role in moving the process forward and generating learning for each group. Overall, the process generated awareness of the tacit learning that had taken place in the group’s work and contributed to the sharing of that learning with other members. As evidenced from the dialogue and insights in each profile, the reflection process extended and deepened the learning from practice. As evident for Texas LEADS, the learning edge question identified during the reflection process created an ongoing conscious learning process.

In terms of the transformative learning that can occur in this kind of collective learning process, there appear to be several different possible kinds. The Beloved Community Center’s profile illustrated a powerful sharpening and clarifying of the questions underlying the advancement of their work. In addition, they identified new questions during the process, another significant kind of learning. The case of Texas LEADS points to the potential for the process to initiate collective learning related to developing connections across individual experiences of learning from practice and integrating the meanings from those experiences. Common to both processes was learning related to gaining visibility on the complexity of the work, and promoting greater collective understanding what happened, why it happened, and what it led to.

**References**


