

MIT@Lawrence – a sustained city-campus partnership
Assessing the Practices of Public Scholarship



MIT@Lawrence is a sustained, multi-faceted partnership between the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the City of Lawrence, MA, a small, ethnically diverse city 30 miles northwest of Boston. Over the partnership's 10-year history, faculty and students from many MIT programs have worked together with Lawrence residents, civic institutions and

community-based organizations to address problems facing the city. Projects have addressed abandoned and foreclosed property management, neighborhood revitalization, and “cleaning and transforming” polluted canals and alleyways.

This case study highlights assessment of two aspects of this partnership: the Lawrence Practicum, a required practicum for urban planning graduate students, and the MIT@Lawrence Story Project, a narrative retrospective of a multi-year HUD Community Outreach Partnership Centers (COPC) grant. Both of these projects and the assessments were developed and overseen by Dr. Lorlene Hoyt when she was an assistant and then associate professor at MIT.

This summary draws upon an interview conducted with Dr. Hoyt in April 2012, and an excellent article by Dr. Hoyt (“A City Campus Engagement Theory From, and For, Practice,” *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, Fall 2010), which offers significant detail about the project work, assessment efforts, and the tenure process.



Lawrence Practicum – After-action Reflection
Brief description

At five points throughout the semester-long practicum course, immediately following an important event in Lawrence (e.g. a public presentation or a city council meeting), students paired with community members and conducted 60-second, video-recorded interviews of each other using one or two questions provided by Dr. Hoyt. The aim was to uncover participant assumptions and therefore document learning by identifying and describing a moment of surprise. They asked each other: Where were you? What did you hear? What did you see?

What did you or someone else do? And why were you surprised? All of the video footage was collected by the teaching assistant and edited into a several minute video that simultaneously reflected individual impressions and told a collective story about lessons learned. Each time, a few themes emerged out of participants' responses. The students watched and discussed the compiled interviews in class and used the feedback to shape the next steps in the project.

A short film capturing work and reflections from both the Spring and Fall 2010 practica may be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tL_CrAqrMUA. (Hoyt, L. and J. Juarez-Araniva. "MIT@Lawrence Practicum: A Year in Review." DVD. Cambridge, MA: MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning, M.I.T., 2011.)

Who: Massachusetts Institute of Technology; urban planning Prof. Lorlene Hoyt; graduate students; City of Lawrence; Lawrence community-based organizations

What: Lawrence Practicum, a project-based, service-learning course for urban planning students focused on community development

Where: Lawrence & Cambridge, MA, 1999-2011

Assessment Questions: Is transformative learning taking place? Where, when and how?

Assessment Methods: The Practicum used "after-action" video reflection as an iterative method to uncover participants' assumptions and inform project development and

Assessment Snapshot

An innovative method evolves



MIT practicum students in Arlington neighborhood in Lawrence, Carlos Espinoza-Toro and Amruta Sudhalkar, with civic leaders, Fausto Nunez and Domingo Melendez, (left to right), near Spicket River, 2007 (Photo: Debmalya Guha)

The initial reason for integrating reflection-assessment into the Lawrence Practicum course was to comply with the guidelines the MIT Urban Planning faculty established for service learning practica. When Dr. Hoyt began teaching the course, she used a more standard approach: individual student reflection papers. This method was an opportunity for students to share confidential feedback, but it did not include community voices, and it failed to capture participants' immediate reactions to important events in the collaborative project. The idea to use video to document feedback and uncover participant assumptions came from a

couple of Dr. Hoyt's colleagues in the MIT CoLab, Sebastiao Ferreira and Alexa Mills. The video method created a new opportunity for a second iteration of reflection where students reviewed their own feedback and, when necessary, revised plans for next steps based on what they learned. Community partners were able to view the compiled reflection video on the MIT CoLab website and comment.

Later, especially in the most recent years, I wanted to use the after-action reflection exercises to reveal student and community partner assumptions. By reflecting on their practice with one another and being honest about when and why they experienced difficulties and breakthroughs, they became aware of the transformative learning that was taking place. Transformative learning takes place when someone's assumptions are challenged, when what they expected to happen does not happen.

Core values: realizing collaboration and generativity

In this case, an assessment approach evolved over time from student-focused and routine to more inclusive and **collaborative**. Lawrence residents and MIT students participated equally in the assessment process, which provided another opportunity for exchange and learning. The assessment approach was **generative** because it was integrated into the course and the project, rather than separate from it. Each reflection point, and the resulting video of responses, was used to assess a moment in time and redirect, if necessary, the next component of the practicum project. "It was an essential ingredient for them to move successfully through the next phase." The video recording and editing was **practicable** in the MIT setting, where resources and expertise were available to quickly turn the raw reflection footage into an edited film. But this case highlights the fact that practicability is context-dependent; assessment methods and processes must be adapted to the time and resources available at ones institution.

MIT@Lawrence Story Project – A New Narrative for Lawrence

Brief description



Youth Activity Survey results, Building Blocks summer program, Lawrence, Massachusetts (Photo: Leo Burd).

The MIT@Lawrence Story Project was a culminating product of nearly ten years of collaboration that examined the partnership through dozens of interviews with participants. The project was motivated in part by a need to report the outcomes of a multi-year HUD COPC grant. But Lawrence residents were interested in the project as a way to develop new narrative about their city, to tell a story that celebrated diversity, resilience and collective action. A small group of MIT students worked closely with Dr. Hoyt to conduct interviews, which were video-recorded, and edit them into a 15-minute film. (View it on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yLhz6YxulCY>)

Speaking to multiple audiences

Over the decade-long partnership, MIT@Lawrence came to involve many different partners with varied goals and interests. As a result,

the Story Project needed to address multiple audiences including: the HUD COPC program, the City of Lawrence, the MIT tenure review committee, and a broader scholarly audience via a Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning article written about the project. Hoyt also wanted it to speak to future audiences; she viewed the project in part as an institutional record: “I was concerned about capturing the history of the partnership and being able to institutionalize the memory of the work in a way that could make sense to someone who would fill my shoes if I were to move on.” This forethought reflects one dimension of how assessments can be **generative** over longer time horizons.

Core values: the tension between collaboration and practicability

As an assessment, the Story Project struggled with the tension that often arises between a commitment to **collaboration** and the realities of what is practicable. When asked to reflect on the collaborative nature of the project, Hoyt responded:

On one hand it was, on the other hand, it never felt like it was collaborative enough. Partners helped flesh out the idea and helped identify questions to ask, but the students, in effect, crafted the story... So I have never felt completely comfortable with the collaborative aspect.

Time was a barrier to full collaboration. The Story Project team collected over 300 hours of recorded interviews. Subsequently, the students spent many days and nights in editing lab at MIT. As the editors, students had the power to shape the story. Few if any Lawrence residents had the time to participate in that way, however Hoyt noted that one of the lead students, Marianna Leavy-Sperounis, had worked in Lawrence as a community organizer for four years prior to joining MIT. The video format lent itself quite well to the value of **reciprocity**. Showings of the film invited further opportunities for reflection and dialogue. At an unveiling party in Lawrence, “we got a lot of feedback and a lot of people engaged. They were thrilled to see their friends up on the screen.” A ‘new narrative’ was being established in Lawrence. The documentary film expresses a community and its attitudes more powerfully than a report or slide show can.

Where to learn more about MIT@Lawrence

- Article: <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mjcs/3239521.0017.106?view=image> Hoyt, Lorlene (2010) “A City Campus Engagement Theory From, and For, Practice,” Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, 17(1), Fall 2010, 75-88. (A version of this article can be found in Saltmarsh and Hartley, eds. “To Serve a Larger Purpose” Engagement for Democracy and the Transformation of Higher Education.)
- MIT@Lawrence: <http://mitatlawrence.mit.edu/>
- MIT@Lawrence Story Project: http://mitatlawrence.mit.edu/?page_id=548
- MIT CoLab: <http://colab.mit.edu/>