

Mapmaking: An Intergenerational Exploration of Community

Mapmaking and maps seems to have a wide appeal across the generations. Perhaps it's our fascination with our personal place in the universe - "this is my home" - that motivates this interest. Perhaps it's the visual, non-linear nature of maps that draws upon our right-brain, creative side, and connects with bodily experience. Whatever the reason, maps and mapmaking can provide fertile material for discussions of community life and neighborhood improvement. As Doug Abberley notes, maps should not be merely the product of experts since every one of us inhabits a place and can create its map.

Here's a brief overview of an intergenerational mapmaking project that can be adapted for any neighborhood.

Crestmont Discovery Project: Bloomington, Indiana, 2004

Goals:

- Assist young members of the Crestmont Boys and Girls Club to explore and learn about the physical, natural, and social environment of the club and the surrounding neighborhood.
- Connect Boys and Girls Club members with neighborhood elders.
- Empower youth to identify and act upon their ideas for neighborhood improvement.

Activities:

Day One - Mapping your Neighborhood

Day Two- A Walk around the Block: Neighborhood Exploration and Documentation

Day Three - Debriefing and Social Action Discussion

Resources Needed:

- Responsible chaperones for the "walk around the block" phase
- Volunteers or older students to assist with preparation of materials and group process.
- Neighborhood GIS map(s)
- Disposable cameras
- Prepared neighborhood checklist booklet
- Digital camera or video camera (optional)
- Art supplies: newsprint, markers, colored pencils, mat paper
- Community volunteers on the receiving end of visitations

Preparation:

Going into somebody else's neighborhood "to help them" is risky business, however kind your motivation. Hence, building a linkage with an authentic neighborhood institution is the critical first step in a project like this. It might be a church or synagogue. It might be a community-based organization. Whatever the partner might be, its legitimacy within the eyes of the neighborhood residents is important to your success. Government institutions might look like good partners from the outside but the object of suspicion from within.

In Bloomington, this project was organized around an Indiana University service-learning class entitled *Field Seminar in Cultural Documentation*, offered by the author, a cultural anthropologist and his colleague Dr. Inta Carpenter, of the IU Folklore Institute. Crestmont is a public housing community that has been subject to stigmatizing attitudes within the larger community over its 25 year history. Our approach to the neighborhood was through the Resident Council, authorized by the Housing Authority as the official voice of the neighborhood. Through the council, we were directed to the Crestmont Boys and Girls Club, a satellite of the larger, downtown club, and housed in a converted duplex/townhome within the public housing stock of homes and apartments. The director of the Boys and Girls Club was thrilled with the idea of the project and offered staff assistance with gaining access to and support of the children.

Approximately one month prior to the event, the instructors and students secured a GIS (Geographic Information System) map of the target neighborhood from the City of Bloomington Utilities Dept. The map was intentionally plotted to include the fringe areas beyond the public housing community itself, in order to explore and challenge the children's notions of their neighborhood boundaries. Data plotted onto the GIS map included streets, street names, house footprints and

numbers, railroads, and other structures/features of significance. Utilities and other layers of data are not needed for this project.

Secure a roll of newsprint (obtain "ends" from your local newspaper) and, with masking tape, erect a paper wall approximately 8 - 10' x 4'. This mural will remain in place for the time needed to transfer the GIS map to the blank wall.

The standard GIS map (approx. 24" x 36") needs to be cut into sections that are sized 8 1/2" x 11" in order to create transparencies that can next be projected onto the large blank mural. Using Sharpee pens, the college students created a giant map of the neighborhood on the blank mural. Different colors can be used for streets, house footprints, and other structures of significance (swimming pools, parks, etc.). Each house includes its corresponding house number. This project requires several person/hours of labor but is very enjoyable for the students. (The college students were introduced to the neighborhood in prior "walk-throughs" and were required to write about their impressions in student journals and through haiku poetry.)

An example of a neighborhood map, derived from another workshop, is shown here:



In addition to the "big map", we prepared and duplicated for each prospective youth participant a checklist to be employed on a chaperoned exploratory walk through the neighborhood. The booklet provides each child with a set of questions to be answered as they walk through the neighborhood, not unlike a scavenger hunt, of course. In the spring of 2004, the theme for our project was *Alice's Adventure through Wonderland*.

Day One: Initial Mapmaking Exercise

Following the creation of a flyer/permission slip to be sent home with the children, the Boys and Girls Club staff helped recruit and gather children for Day One of the exercise (an after school project, needless to say). For this project, we displayed the giant map at the club on two adjoining tables, as wall space was insufficient for posting it. Before breaking into smaller groups, we facilitated a general discussion in front of the map with the children. Then we asked our college students (four in number) to work with small groups of kids, each child being provided with markers, colored pencils, and a blank sheet of drawing paper (18" x 24"). The following script was provided to small group leaders:

After you get the kids' attention, and before passing out materials, you can start with some trigger questions (trigger questions are just examples- try to use them to get beyond yes and no responses).

Does everyone here live in this neighborhood? How many?

Was anyone born in this neighborhood?

If not, when did you move here?

Find out who has lived here the longest?

Find out who is the newest resident:

How did you learn about your new neighborhood?

Explore with your bike?

Ask questions?

Found a friend?

What's the best thing about this neighborhood?

What would you change if you were in charge?

So just what is this neighborhood?

What is its name?

Does anyone know other names for this place?

Does anyone know how it got these names?

What is your favorite name?

What would you say are the boundaries of this neighborhood? Where does it end?

Which direction is north?

And so on for the other three boundaries?

OK - know we're going to have you put your ideas on paper so you can tell people about your neighborhood.

Tomorrow, we're going on an adventure walk to see things first hand, but today, we're walking through the neighborhood with our imaginations.

Pass out the materials - ask them to wait for further directions.

You have the entire piece of paper to work on. You have lots of different colors to work with. Before you start, close your eyes and picture your house or apartment. You can be a bird flying above it and looking down. Or you can imagine walking out the front door. Think about where your neighborhood begins and ends. It might be at a street or at a building. When you are ready, open your eyes and draw a map of your neighborhood. You can put anything you want in the map. There's plenty of time.

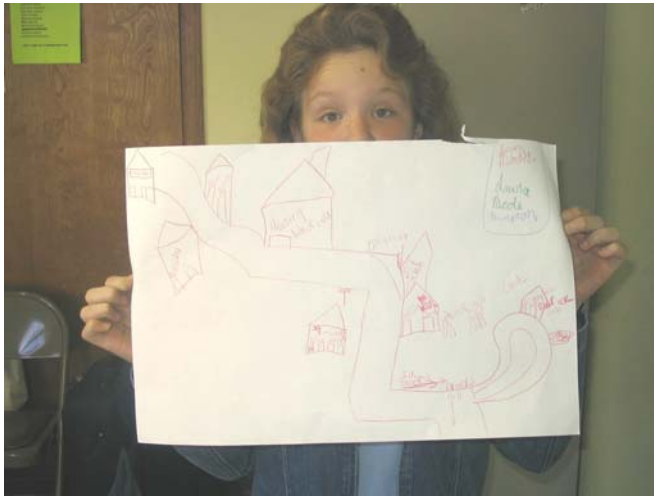
When you think you are done... put some notes on the map that show things that are important to you: your favorite place, your scariest place, where your best friend lives, where you spend a lot of time, those kinds of things. If time allows, ask the kids to share their maps with each other, discussing some of the questions asked previously.

When everyone is done... don't forget tomorrow we will be meeting at 4 pm for the walk. Don't be late since we have people waiting for us at different places to help us in the adventure.

After the children complete the exercise, drawing their own maps of the neighborhood, post the maps and/or pictures of the exercise around the club. We used a digital camera profusely to document the process for and with the kids.

Here are the kids at work:





Day Two: A Walk around the Block

This project takes inspiration from three sources in particular:
Walk Around the Block. Graves, G. 1997. Prairie Village, KS. The Center for Understanding of the Built Environment.
Youth Planning Charrettes. Race, B. and Torma, C. 1998. Chicago, IL: American Planning Association
Planning to Stay. Morrish, W. R. and Brown, C.R. 1994. Minneapolis, MN: Design Center for the American Urban Landscape/Milkweed Publications.

In preparation for this exercise, the planning team discussed and decided upon a small number of destinations and themes to be explored by small student groups in a chaperoned walk around the block. In the 2004 exercise, the following challenges were identified:

- One group would identify water features in the neighborhood. (This involved pre-arranged meetings with city officials from utilities and parks/recreation to meet the students and help them learn about a water supply tower and a community swimming pool.)
- One group would visit a straw bale house being constructed in the neighborhood by Habitat for Humanity and visit to interview Mrs. Harris, one of the oldest residents of the neighborhood.
- One group would receive a "behind the scenes" tour of the Opportunity House thrift shop.
- One group would visit the community kitchen and also a one-stop grocery to do research on price comparisons retrieved ahead for other major groceries outside of the neighborhood.

Prior to beginning the discovery walks, each student was provided the booklet and offered an orientation to the questions asked and the kinds of observations expected of them during the walk. Gathered around the "giant map", we had a general discussion of neighborhood boundaries and key landmarks. The students were informed that, upon their return, they would be asked to transfer their observations to the giant map. A disposable flash camera was provided to each group. One group was accompanied by a staff person to serve as a videographer. To accompany the students on the tour, go here:

Following the organized chaos of gathering the kids and constituting the groups, the discovery walk was begun. A ratio of two adults to four children was maintained. Adults in each group were provided, in advance, with directions for their specific destination.

The groups returned to the Club after approximately 45 minutes. They took part in the normal snack routine at the Club and those not returning home worked with the giant map, using markers and colored pencils to embellish the map, label destinations, and record observations. Several located and labeled their own homes on the map as well as the homes of their friends.

Day Three: Debriefing and Social Action

On Day Three of the project, the kids re-convened around the giant map and continued, initially, to add notations and labels. A general discussion was facilitated to draw reactions from the kids regarding things they learned about the neighborhood from their walk. Once again, they discussed favorite places, places that need to be cleaned up, places to play, places to shop, places to meet their friends, etc. With encouragement, solicited comments were transferred to the map.

In a final component of the discussion, the kids were asked to think carefully about four “big and cool” ideas for neighborhood improvement*. The question “what would make this a good neighborhood to live in generated four core responses:

- “More gardens like Mrs. Harris’s.”
 - Mrs. Harris, the elder interviewed by one group, maintains a lush and attractive flower garden outside of her apartment.
- “The trash dumpster should be moved from the circle.”
 - Near the playground sits a large dumpster subject to use by people who have no connection with the neighborhood.
- “People should be nicer to each other.”
- “More park benches for old people are needed.”

*the phrase “big and cool ideas” comes from Race and Thorma 1998.

Digital photos drawn from the previous two days, downloaded and matted for the students, were distributed and provided some immediate feedback and reinforcement of the enthusiasm for the project. The kids felt rewarded and acknowledged in a very direct way through this little gift.

Follow-up and Social Action

Two subsequent events at the main Boys and Girls Club provided an opportunity to showcase the work of the kids: the annual awards banquet and a

career opportunities fair. The university students assembled project artifacts into a display to be erected and our videographer created a 15" video with titles that could be shown on a laptop.

Another public event in the neighborhood, a street fair/service fair, provided an opportunity to share the project results with a broader audience beyond Club kids and their parents. At this display, a voting table was set up highlighting the four big and cool ideas and residents voted, with beans, for their top choices.

At a subsequent meeting of the Residents Council for the public housing community, two of the project participants were assisted to give a presentation, with the video, on the project and reveal the results of the informal street fair poll. The kids' presentation was so well received, they were asked to consider providing some leadership for the creation of a kids' council for the neighborhood.

When informed at a staff meeting about the problems associated with the dumpster the (new) housing authority director installed video surveillance and created a campaign for residents to track license plates of illegal dumpster users.

The Boys and Girls Club is also initiating a recycling project to involve neighborhood kids in the retrieval of recyclables to generate club income.

Lastly, a local artist who specializes in public and collaborative art projects, has agreed to help follow up on the park bench project. This will be initiated in the winter of 2005 with a collaborative design workshop centered around the front yard of the Boys and Girls Club, to be followed by grant writing efforts to implement construction and landscaping there and in other parts of the neighborhood.

Summary

Multiple learning goals can be met through a project of this nature. Young people are introduced to elders in the neighborhood and have their own knowledge and experience affirmed and validated. They are enabled to work with older students as well as adults in an egalitarian way. Through their research, they identify both community problems and community assets and, with follow up, build trust with adults to help them work through neighborhood problems. Follow up is essential, as ordinary contacts with charitable adults coming through the Club are fleeting.

In one unanticipated outcome of the project, a boy took special liking to the visiting father of one of the IU students in the service-learning class. The father, a university professor himself, had joined his daughter to see what her classes

were like. Upon his return to retirement in New York, the gentleman struck up email correspondence with the boy and this unlikely relationship remains in place one year later!