

Community Geography's Potential for Broadening Participation*

Dr. Timothy L. Hawthorne, Georgia State University Dept. of Geosciences

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Introduction to Community Geography

The growing subfield of community geography places explicit emphasis on identifying the spatial thinking and local knowledges that emerge from neighborhood residents' experiences and seeks to "affect positive community change, in a variety of ways, whether it is to visualize challenges and assets, improve service delivery, or more accurately identify geographic disparities" (Robinson, 2010: 6). As a framework dedicated to community-engaged scholarship and teaching, the subfield of community geography holds much promise for developing a more inclusive and societal-relevant discipline of geography. Community geography draws heavily from previous intellectual movements in the discipline. The subfield is greatly influenced by radical geographers of the 1960s and 1970s led by the likes of William Bunge and others who argued for broader participation in the discipline and a more societal-relevant discipline. The development of community geography can also be attributed to the early 1990s GIS and Society debates in which GIS researchers and social theorists considered the social implications and human impacts of GIS and other geospatial technologies. Community geography also borrows largely from the more recent Public Participation GIS (PPGIS) and Participatory GIS (PGIS) movements.

Dr. Jonnell Robinson (2010), a pioneer in the field and the Syracuse Community Geographer, suggests that the process of identifying and visualizing community-based challenges and assets can affect positive community change. Community geography utilizes Participatory GIS and community-based methodologies to enhance long-term community planning and decision-making by engaging community residents and organizations (especially residents from underrepresented groups such as minorities, women and lower-income residents) (Harris et al., 1995; Craig et al., 2002; Elwood, 2006; Sieber, 2006; Dunn, 2007; Hawthorne & Kwan, 2011). The PGIS frameworks and related methodologies used in community geography often challenge traditional top-down decision making by involving multiple stakeholders, community-defined local knowledges, and data in socio-political discussions (Ghose & Huxhold, 2001; Kwaku Kyem, 2004; Knigge & Cope, 2006). The products of community-based PGIS research are often highly visual, shared resources (i.e. GIS maps and data, sketch maps, audio/video, imagery, oral histories, and drawings). Such products can provide powerful visual arguments to support/confirm the local understanding and experiences of community residents and organizations (Harris et al., 1995; Craig et al., 2002; Elwood, 2006; Dunn, 2007; Hawthorne et al., 2008; Duval-Diop et al., 2010). However, a major limitation for of this research is that such work is often dependent on

GIS technologies, which come with a steep learning curve and cost. These issues often make such technologically enhanced projects unattainable for community organizations and residents (Schuurman, 2000; Sieber, 2006). Multiple case studies on community-based GIS suggest that this limitation can be overcome through creative university and community partnerships (see Craig et al., 2002; Balram and Dragicevic, 2006; Stinton & Lund, 2007; Robinson, 2010; Hawthorne, 2011). Robinson (2010) in particular demonstrates that a sustained engagement by a university has the potential to achieve substantial benefits in the realization of community-based goals and in the coordination of community-based social service delivery.

Given that community geography draws heavily from participatory/community-based trajectories and mixed methodologies, I contend that community geography has the potential for broadening participation in the discipline. It can attract potential students and community residents from underrepresented groups that have historically been disenfranchised with some research directions that are viewed only as “academic exercises” with few obviously apparent benefits to the broader non-academic society. By engaging researchers and students from across the social sciences with community practitioners in innovative partnerships focused on community-based geographic inquiry, we can move toward broader participation in the discipline. The broader appeal of this intellectual movement can be realized by and promoted to prospective participants by highlighting the subfield’s intense focus on: 1) community-driven problem solving; 2) findings that are free of academic jargon and shared with non-academic audiences; and 3) community residents as active knowledge producers and contributors. In promoting the subfield to a broader audience of future geography scholars, we must also emphasize that community geography offers opportunities to: 1) collect and develop multiple local knowledges and understandings of geographic issues, such as the availability of “safe” neighborhood spaces, green spaces, or food stores, for example, particularly from underrepresented groups; 2) disseminate shared community-based products (i.e. maps, geospatial data, GIS and map applications, narratives, oral histories, artwork, music, performances and other multimedia) in academic and non-academic settings; 3) rethink traditional undergraduate/graduate geographic education with a new/renewed commitment to engaged, community-based learning; and 4) more carefully consider research/pedagogical ethics, positionality and identities. Below, I outline some of my own community geography projects that seek to develop a broader participation in the discipline, while also highlighting the points raised above.

Research Experiences for Undergraduates (REU) Site: Addressing Social and Environmental Disparities through Community Geography and Geographic Information Systems:

This summer at Georgia State University in Atlanta, we are hosting the country’s first community geography REU site (<http://csaw.gsu.edu/nsf-reu/>). The project is funded for the next three years at \$350,000 by the National Science Foundation. Working with faculty mentors in one of

three research tracks, 13 selected undergraduates from a nationwide pool will engage in community-based research and fieldwork to quantitatively and qualitatively examine neighborhood change, property markets, air and soil quality, urban green spaces, and neighborhood visioning in partnership with neighborhood residents and community groups. Our recruitment efforts are focused on students from underrepresented groups, including minorities, women, first generation college students, veterans and persons with disabilities. Students will be provided with a generous financial package including a \$3000 stipend, room and board, travel monies to and from the REU site, and travel monies to present their projects to a national or international geography meeting.

Introducing Underrepresented Youth to Geospatial Technologies through Community Geography:

This work demonstrates potential for college study in geospatial technologies since many students are unaware such resources/careers exist. These projects pay particular attention to students in lower-income and underperforming primary and secondary schools.

- Introduction to Geospatial Technologies (IGT) Workshop: 150 Atlanta urban high school students learn GIS/GPS by examining data collected in my Belize GIS study abroad course (coming in Fall 2012).
- Columbus, GA SafeRoutes2School: 30 5th graders from a lower-income district sketch mapped their perceptions of safe/unsafe locations along school walking routes. Students also completed GPS transect walks of neighborhood (Fall 2010).
- Columbus, OH Food Access Network (CFAN): 45 Near Eastside youth sketch mapped existing and potential community gardens. Students also completed GPS walk locating sites and attributed characteristics (Summer 2010).

Cartography & GIS Service Learning Courses: In 2008, I and Ola Ahlqvist developed The Ohio State University Department of Geography's first service learning course (geography.osu.edu/maps2serve). The course is now entering its 5th year. The course focuses on community asset mapping (social services, historic pride) in Near Eastside Columbus, Ohio. To date the course has generated 5000 print and online resource maps. The course has been replicated elsewhere including the Maps4Community project in The University of North Dakota Geography Department (<http://arts-sciences.und.edu/geography/maps4community>). The Maps2Serve project also led to a United Way community mapping workshop where I taught sketch mapping to lower-income residents and organization leaders. I am developing similar service learning models at GSU.

Community GIS Graduate Seminar (ongoing): Students are working in lower-income neighborhoods in Atlanta to understand community needs, desires and future visions. Discussions center on identity, positionality, and ethics in working with underrepresented groups. The course projects will have students work with underrepresented communities on a project that contributes to a significant neighborhood issue as defined by members of the community. Students will complete GIS analyses and report findings in a way that infuses local knowledge and contributes to a broader community discussion. 5 of 13 students are from underrepresented groups.

2012 Belize GIS Study Abroad Course (May 2012): I am Program Director for a 2012 GIS service learning study abroad course in Belize (<http://belize.gsu.edu>). Students will work with lower-income Belizean residents to analyze sustainable tourism practices that can support social service development in Belize. Nearly 1/3 of the 22 enrolled students are from underrepresented groups. Students will design projects based on the fieldwork data that highlight community-defined issues. Their maps and analyses will be critiqued by and shared with Belizean residents.

Questions for Moving Forward with Community Geography

The subfield of community geography focuses on community-driven problem solving; seeks to develop findings that are understandable to non-academic audiences; and strives for inclusion of residents that are typically marginalized from academic research and education. There is great potential for the subfield as we attempt to broaden participation in the discipline of geography. As we move forward, there are some questions that warrant future discussion. I am hopeful some of these questions can begin to be answered at the retreat.

1. How do we create geography and GIS courses that emphasize real-world applications and fieldwork that move beyond the formal classroom setting? In my view, this is particularly problematic with the legalities and perceived risks of taking students into communities.
2. How do we provide more funding opportunities to underrepresented groups especially as the cost of education is skyrocketing?
3. How might we rethink tenure and promotion requirements for professors and lecturers interested in trying innovative community-based teaching and research methods? In my view, the new Syracuse community geography tenure-track position may offer a good model to replicate.
4. How do we ensure that academic research and education practices value local knowledges, including the knowledges of underrepresented groups? More specifically, how do we contribute to community problem-solving and represent knowledge without exploiting community members from underrepresented groups?
5. Given the increasing pressures placed on demonstrating societal relevance to external funding agencies (think NSF broader impacts), how might we better promote and position community geography to contribute to disciplinary growth?
6. How might we specifically target recruitment efforts to underrepresented groups without alienating the traditional base of students?

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