REFRAMING COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS IN EDUCATION

Uniting the Power of Place and Wisdom of People

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THE COMMUNITY LEARNING EXCHANGE

This book is about a process and a way of life that celebrate the power of place and the wisdom of people. A Community Learning Exchange (CLE) provides an opportunity for diverse community members—leaders, activists, educators, youth, elders—to come together for a period of engaged, deep learning. Together in relationship, these community members openly examine their common challenges, collective gifts, and then freely exchange successful approaches and tools that can drive changes within themselves, their organizations (including schools), and their communities. CLEs break the isolation people working toward organizational and community change often feel by encouraging the deepening of their relationships with others. CLEs provide time and space for everyday people to come together and join in deep and purposeful conversations that are very difficult to have within the blur of our hectic daily schedules and lives. During CLEs, participants work to establish conditions of safety and trust so that they can openly share their gifts with others so that together they can challenge themselves, their organizations, and their communities in order to better meet their individual and collective needs while supporting the development, growth, and happiness of others in equitable and just ways.

This book is born out of the gifts and strengths we have seen in communities. It is nurtured by the need to *reframe school and community partnerships*. We can see inefficiencies in our bureaucracies, inequities in our communities, and injustices in our organizations and institutions. But how can we change them? How do we go about transforming those very things that mediate individuals and society so that we can make life healthier and more fulfilling for ourselves and for others. Some of us want to help reform schools that do not seem to be effectively nurturing our sons' and daughters' growth and development. Others are looking

to make our neighborhoods safer. Still others recognize the challenges newcomers face in our cities. We believe that the Community Learning Exchange and its foundational axioms provide a tried, tested, and true pathway to those changes and transformations. Specifically, individual, collective, and community changes occur through Community Learning Exchanges built from the axioms that (a) learning and leadership are a dynamic social process, (b) conversations are critical and central pedagogies, (c) the people closest to the issues are best situated to discover answers to local questions and problems, (d) crossing boundaries enriches how we develop and learn, and (e) hope and change are built on assets and dreams of locals and their communities.

We also know that organizational and community changes are complex processes and that complexity requires that we seek to understand them in intentional ways. Organizations and communities contain an ever-changing array of people with diverse needs and concerns, and assets and gifts. These complex dynamics require that we are purposeful in our efforts to understand them. Over time and across settings and communities, the Community Learning Exchange has produced and informed a theory for how those changes occur, and thus how they can be nurtured and directed. If the five axioms of the Community Learning Exchange provide postulates that enrich and deepen meaning with each application, the Community Learning Exchange theory of change provides a template or a lens through which we both examine and enact changes in our organizations and communities. Specifically, the CLE theory of change invites us to look at our families, our neighborhoods, our communities, and our organizations with an eye for relationships, assets, stories, place, politic, and action (RASPPA). Importantly, the RASPPA theory of change creates the cognitive, affective, and relational space in which CLE participants can begin to come together and share their collective gifts in order to understand their collective challenges from multiple perspectives, and then to co-construct solutions to those challenges that, when enacted together, can lead to sustained and empowering action and change.

The Work of the Community Learning Exchange

Launched in 2008, this sustained work encourages communities to work across boundaries to cultivate collective leadership and local solutions to issues. Much of this work focuses on engaging the community to improve education as a vital pathway of opportunity and well-being for historically marginalized communities. A key component of this work is the inclusion of local communities sharing their approaches broadly with other organizations and communities. CLEs take place as national gatherings, as well as regional and local learning exchanges.

An early CLE brought 10 communities from states ranging from New York to Hawaii together in south Texas for a 3-day CLE focused on the theme "Collective Leadership and Systems Change: Examining Poverty, Practice, and Policy." About

70 people from different walks of life participated, including high school students, teachers, and principals; nonprofit workers; university professors; and parents concerned about their children's education. Two local community-based organizations, the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development and La Union del Pueblo Entero (LUPE), hosted the gathering. Together with the national CLE planning team, the host organizations planned the agenda, organized policy field trips as site visits, and designed a process for engagement that utilized interactive and place-based pedagogies. Local organizers understood the issues best and provided the local stories on how families, communities, and other sectors dealt with poverty; local participants were also interested in learning how other communities addressed similar issues. How and where the communities came together were key questions that informed how the agenda would be shaped and the physical locations where communities would engage in conversations. The issues mattered, the conversations mattered, and the spaces where ideas and conversations were shared mattered, as physical and metaphorical spaces were fundamental considerations to maximize the learning process.

Community in the Community Learning Exchange

In the CLE vernacular, community is a process as much as it is a physical, tangible place. Community is not something that stands alone but is a generative structure informed by a set of ideas, practices, struggles, hopes, and dreams. It is a set of questions that challenges assumptions, principles, and ways of being. Community is where we make meaning, transform meaning, and work together for the common good. It is where people come together with the intent to build, teach, and learn with each other. Community is a state of mind, a metaphorical expression of how people can be together. Pedagogies that are community-centered value people and tend to identify and build the agency they bring with them. One youth from South Texas described community by suggesting, "It's like *primos* (cousins) you never met before." The youth suggested we come from the same ancestors, some with different shades of skin color, some with different accents and languages. "But we're all the same," he said, "because we all hurt, we all laugh, and we can all celebrate what we are together." In the end, he suggested his greatest realization through the CLE experience is that community is about a way of life. It's about living a life where we invest in our relationships, recognize our gifts, explore our stories, respect our place, and do all this in an ethical manner. This is the meaning of "community" in the Community Learning Exchange.

The community of the CLE emerged from a Kellogg Foundation national leadership initiative called the Kellogg Leadership for Community Change (KLCC). Started in 2002 with the goal of building community leadership in some of the most distressed regions of the country, KLCC intended to use the Foundation's lessons on building local leadership capacities through a model of

collective leadership for community change. The Foundation selected 11 communities for the initiative that spanned between 2002 and 2006. It identified two national organizations, the Center for Ethical Leadership (CEL) from Seattle and the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) from Washington, DC, to coordinate the national work. The national organizations played key roles in facilitating the leadership development through organizing national conferences, facilitating skill-building workshops, and holding the national community together. Both CEL and IEL played critical roles in supporting the Community Learning Exchange.

The expansion of the CLE network has been organic and generative. As the KLCC grant period came to an end, the communities banded together in a new collective iteration known as the Community Learning Exchange. The CLE family expanded from 11 communities to dozens of communities from at least a dozen states. The growth has typically occurred through a generative process where an original community invites a new community to participate in a CLE. Identifying new communities to participate depends on the relationship between the organizing theme for a particular CLE and the nature of leadership for community change in which a prospective community may be engaged. Readiness and vision are key dispositions for invitation. A community must have awareness that it wants to change and there must be a semblance of hope for change. The original communities looked for such qualities as they invited new communities into the process. For example, the original community from South Texas, named the Llano Grande Center, invited another community from Hawaii to participate in the South Texas CLE, because the Hawaiian community was involved in systems change initiatives through a close look at policy and poverty. A new community from California was invited to the South Texas CLE for the same reason, as were communities from the Bronx, New York, rural North Carolina, and Jacksonville, Florida. Each of the new communities demonstrated readiness to act and a vision to engage in leadership for the public good.

A close look at Jacksonville provides useful lessons in understanding the spirit and scope of learning exchanges. When a Jacksonville team designed their CLE, they built on several years of planning, organizing, and hosting of local learning exchanges. Through a multi-year process, local students, teachers, workers in the faith community, and others nurtured local interest in this interactive process for teaching and learning. Local CLEs were held in churches, community centers, and local universities, including a public university and a Historically Black College or University (HBCU). A series of community conversations locally identified the salient issues within the local economy and in the community at large, namely the chronic issue of racial strife and opportunities for African American youth in schools. Through deep discussions on the history of race relations in the region and the role of faith-based organizations, local leaders raised local awareness and

began to reach out to others across the country to learn how other communities worked to resolve issues of race. Jacksonville leaders generated momentum and sought to host a national learning exchange focused on the theme of moral courage. Through their developmental experience, they realized that social and racial justice work required that participants exercise moral courage. They were ready to talk with both local folks, and with communities from across the country about how to share stories specific to moral courage, and how to move toward a future of hope and opportunity.

The Jacksonville team worked strategically with the national planning team to identify communities from different parts of the country and from northern Florida to participate in the Jacksonville learning exchange. "We're looking for communities that see themselves as morally courageous. We want them to be talking to each other, to learn from each other," said a Jacksonville teacher while on a conference call intended to recruit fitting communities. When the communities were identified, each was asked to bring a team from their place; typically, guest communities arrive in teams of four to six. In Jacksonville, like other CLEs, youth were highlighted as team members. In the end, the planning process called for 70 participants recruited from a dozen organizations or communities. Half would be locals, primarily from the Jacksonville area; the other half would come from the continental United States and from Hawaii. Identification of local themes was guided by the question, "Where have we seen moral courage exercised in authentic ways?" Jacksonville organizers subsequently probed the local networks and scanned the regional landscape. The same question guided identification of locations to engage in site visits, an important practice in the evolving CLE pedagogies.

Local organizations came from the state university, the local HBCU, faith-based organizations, social services agencies, and a community development enterprise. All local organizations had been engaged in conversations on issues of race, community, history, and how acts of moral courage have shaped those issues, so they were primed to share and learn. Others traveled long distances. They came from an organization in Seattle that facilitates social, cultural, and historical healing processes and other engagement practices. They came from a school in Central Texas where teachers and school leaders explore the historical roots of inequity in the school and community, and use the findings to shape school curriculum and pedagogies that are culturally relevant and responsible. They came from an organization in Washington, DC, where issues of special needs children across the country are addressed through policy advocacy. They came from Hawaii, where a team works to reverse the colonization forces of Native Hawaiian people through wide-ranging school reform initiatives that place Native Hawaiian culture at the center of teaching and learning. They came from South Texas, where a team of students and faculty members from a regional university work to integrate Mexican American historical and cultural themes into ways of teaching and learning

at a school populated by 90% Mexican American students, but with minimal curricular presence of Mexican American themes across the university. All participating communities saw themselves as exercising moral courage as they pursued their social change agendas. Maintaining alignment to the theme, moral courage in the case of the Jacksonville CLE, is an important part of the planning process.

The work of the CLE has engendered a new brand of civic behavior based on trusting relationships, building assets, and creating new stories by focusing on place and inspiring community action. The work has unleashed a new imagination. A youth who attended the CLE in Jacksonville reflected on her newfound imagination when she said,

> I'd always thought the answers to fixing our problems needed to come from ideas outside our community. But after this experience, including the weeks before the three days of intense CLE work and the weeks after the actual gathering, I'm beginning to think all the answers are here. We just need to tap our imagination more than we have in the past. I've found that my imagination is most active and more creative when I think about all the good people and all the great talent we have in our own community. We have the answers to our problems.

Community Learning Exchanges are about uniting the power of place with the wisdom of people. This can only be done by bringing people together in conversation. During the CLE's early life, teachers, students, and parents from rural South Texas have come together with educators and parents from the Bronx, New York, to learn about how to build on existing local strengths; teachers and students from the island of Oahu have similarly come together with school leaders and students from Central Texas communities to fortify the institution building and community development work they do at home. Leaders from Jacksonville, Florida, rural northeast North Carolina, Seattle, Buffalo, Laguna Pueblo in New Mexico, Washington, DC, rural northwestern Wisconsin, and so many other places have come together to learn from each and to break the isolation of their day-do-day work; they've come together to find new solutions that are respectful, that understand the importance of place, that identify and build on local assets, and that weave stronger communities. People from these far-reaching places have built the skills and learned strategies and processes to do such things through their experience in the CLE.

Rhythm of CLE

The origins of the ideas fueling the CLE's imagination are articulated in its genealogy; the CLE works to unite the power of place with the wisdom of people.

When the elements outlined in this text merge, the spirit of the CLE comes alive. In this context, "coming to life" means that deep conversations take place, thoughtful questions guide the inquiry, relationships are developed, our imagination is enlarged, and the curriculum for engagement is dynamic. This section ties the different elements in the book into a logic model based on the rhythm of the CLE, as it deviates from the traditional step-by-step linear "how-to" model. The rhythm between place, people, and topic/theme is aligned by the CLE's curricular strategies applied by the planning and facilitation team.

In the stories of change and engagement outlined in this book, we see the CLE work in multiple spaces and for varying purposes. The stories can be couched within the ecologies of knowing that are individual, organization, and community, and they highlight varied pedagogical strategies employed in response to each situation and space. This transference of learning in action is the utility and wide-ranging practice of a CLE, but a CLE does not just happen. Each CLE story is shaped by an engagement process set to a rhythm prompted and inspired by a response to the local community, often to a community need, asset, condition, or opportunity. This is a critical step in making the work relevant, responsive, and sustainable.

Genealogy of the Community Learning Exchange

The CLE was a convergence of multiple sources. It started as the Kellogg Leadership for Community Change. By design, the Community Learning Exchange cultivates context and teaching and learning pedagogies that are time-tested and culturally relevant. Specifically, CLE pedagogies were developed from robust instructional approaches that are intergenerational, where elders and youth unite to explore how lessons from the past can help solve problems of the present.

The Community Learning Exchange also grew from the lessons of Myles Horton and the Highlander Folk School (later the Highlander Center for Research and Development), whose work serves as a guidepost. Like Highlander, CLEs embrace the need for strategies that honor the local wisdom of community members. Honoring the words and wisdom of Horton by putting them into practice, the Community Learning Exchange does not frame community work as missionary work. On the contrary, the Community Learning Exchange strives to develop and use strategies that empower local people in their own spaces to find solutions that are organic in order to meet the needs of the people that will live in and sustain healthy communities.

CLE pedagogies are also significantly informed by the wisdom of indigenous and other cultural models of collective leadership that similarly position family and close trusting networks at the center of personal, organizational, and community development approaches. In this respect, the long-term genesis of the

Community Learning Exchange has been shaped by the deep cultural and familial stories of those who led in its innovation. To recognize those stories and their impact on the shape and direction of the Community Learning Exchange, the next section uses personal and organizational stories from the Texas–Mexican border as experienced by authors Francisco and Miguel Guajardo to bring to life how they have shaped the development of the CLE. The personal stories come from their childhood in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when they came to this country as Mexican immigrants. The organizational stories come from the narrative of the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development. Together, these stories document and describe long-term incubation of visions and dreams that would be the soil in which the seeds of the CLE would later grow. Within this fertile soil of their childhood—the ideas learned by listening to the stories of their parents, the summers partially spent self-organizing their own baseball leagues while growing up in rural South Texas, and the dreams of a better story for their family and their community—the roots of the five axioms of the CLE and its theory of change began to take hold.

Guajardo Brothers History: Fertile Soil of the Community Learning Exchange

When they were in elementary school, a few years after having emigrated from Mexico, the Guajardo family (mother Julia, father José Angel, and four sons) became part of the migrant labor stream. One year they migrated to Buttonwillow, California, where the family worked hoeing weeds most of the summer; another summer they traveled to the Texas Panhandle, where they picked onions; and other summers they simply worked the fields in and around their hometown of Elsa in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. But the most formative summer was the one they spent in the labor camp in Keeler, a rural community in Southwestern Michigan. In Keeler their collective leadership skills began to grow.

Two interesting stories emerged from their time in Keeler, particularly from a child development and leadership formation perspective. Because they left South Texas sometime in early April, almost two months before the school year closed, they were obligated to enroll in a local school in Michigan. And they did, in a school in Sister Lakes, a charming coastal town by Lake Michigan. One story emerges from that schooling experience. The other comes from evening social activity at the labor camp.

Frequently in the evenings, the four Guajardo boys sat around in a circle outside the cabin at the labor camp, often with other children who lived in neighboring cabins, and told stories. The adults, including their parents, typically refereed the activity, ensured things were in order, and nurtured conditions so the kids could engage in a kind of safe, creative social activity. On many nights, they listened to radio broadcasts of Cincinnati Reds baseball games. The Reds were the

PHOTO 1.1 Guajardo Family circa 1972.

Source: Guajardo Family. Used with permission.

biggest show in professional sports during those days, the mid- to late 1970s, when Pete Rose, Joe Morgan, Johnny Bench, and others formed the core of the "Big Red Machine," the most feared baseball club of the era. Although Southwestern Michigan was a state away, the Guajardo transistor radio had a far reach and so the Reds' games extended across the airwaves on most clear summer nights, and the games provided prime material for great theater at the labor camp.

Their older brother Juan Jose, or "Pepe," as they call him, typically played the lead role as he mimicked Marty Brenneman, the Reds' play-by-play announcer. One of the younger kids usually performed the color commentating, à la Joe Nuxhall, Brenneman's on-air sidekick. Pepe was the skilled, play-by-play man of the family; he had honed his skills between the ages of five and seven as he listened to the Broncos de Reynosa baseball games on Mexican radio when the family lived south of the border. Pepe was quite the performer, using voice inflection, building drama, and providing thick descriptions of players and their nuances; some of it he learned from the radio announcers, some he simply made up.

The learning was rich. It was about baseball, but also about other subjects. They learned about math, like how to calculate batting averages, earned run averages, and more. If Pete Rose belted one hit in three times at bat, they knew he batted .333 that night. They also learned geography. When manager Sparky Anderson pulled his starting pitcher in the seventh inning and brought in relief pitcher Pedro Borbón from the bullpen, Brenneman was sure to note that Borbón hailed

from the Dominican Republic, so the boys learned about the Dominican Republic. They learned where Oakland was on the map, because Joe Morgan came from there, and so on. Just as importantly, they learned about language, mainly the use of the English language, as they listened to Brenneman and Nuxhall. They learned pronunciation, syntax, and rhetorical devices, as baseball broadcasts are rich with creative wordsmithing.

Almost nightly at the labor camp, they learned how to perform. If a game played on the radio that night, Pepe would lead the performance by repeating much of what the announcers said. He would create during commercial breaks, while the other children imagined and provided color commentary to his Pepe's play-by-play narration. If the Reds had a night off, then it became pure original theater, as Pepe and his announcing crew created new baseball situations; the action in the room was detailed and intense. On those nights, the Reds never lost. And neither did the children at the camp.

The Guajardo parents and other adults from the labor camp were the producers of this theater. They ensured things were safe as the kids played the games and collectively created and imagined new plays and new games. The parents nurtured the conditions where the children could learn the skills and practice specific leadership functions, and where they could do it together. This became their rich training ground for collective leadership.

During the day, they went to school in Sister Lakes. A yellow school bus stopped outside the camp every morning to pick them up, the migrant kids. Just about every one of the migrant kids was Mexican or Mexican American, with the possible exception of two kids, who may have been poor Whites. The bus took them to the school in Sister Lakes, where the migrant kids got off the bus and walked to a side door of the schoolhouse that led them to the migrant classroom in the basement. All the migrant kids went to the basement. They typically stayed in that room the entire day, except for lunchtime—the only time when migrant students saw the first floor of the school. The migrant classroom included all grade levels. First graders joined second, third, and even eighth graders in that basement classroom. Altogether, more than 40 migrant students filled the crowded basement classroom led by a teacher and a teacher aide.

The teachers were very nice. They seemed to care, showing kindness and sensitivity to the students. The classroom rules were fairly standard. The teaching and learning process typically followed the teaching practices that Martin Haberman has come to call "a pedagogy of poverty," where students sit in rows, listen passively to the teacher, and are asked to memorize facts and then regurgitate them on a test. That was the mode of operation in the migrant classroom.

Most importantly, they were in the basement. That's the lingering memory—that the migrant kids went to school in the basement. They typically did not mix with the other students, the locals who were not part of the migrant experience. Their classrooms were on the first and second floors and in the light. The migrant

students rarely saw them, except for glimpses as they came into the schoolhouse in the morning and as they left in the afternoon. It was clear enough to the migrant students that they were treated differently, perhaps even in a manner consistent with segregationist practices. It is difficult to measure the impact of this reality, though we know the preponderance of evidence suggests that segregationist practices in schools have deep psychological effects on children. The legal and social discourse that surrounded the historic 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court case elevated into the public consciousness the argument that segregation and its practices adversely affect the psychology of children. Sending migrant students to the basement constituted a practice of segregation in this particular school, an experience tantamount to the experience other children in parts of the Jim Crow South experienced in schools and even in social life. The migrant student life in Southwestern Michigan was very similar. In the mid-1970s, this schooling experience exposed migrant students, and the Guajardos specifically, to the underbelly of their enlightened society. They would have been in serious trouble if this had been the extent of their educational life as well as the source of their assets, strengths, and gifts.

Fortunately, this was not the extent of their daily educational experience, because after school the bus took them back to the labor camp where they prepared for a richer, deeper learning process around storytelling. The Cincinnati Reds games on the radio offered one excuse around which to convene "class." But on the "off" nights when the Reds were not on the radio, that was when Pepe and the labor camp kids were most "on." On those nights, Pepe created his own play-by-play, others provided color commentary, and they generally told stories. In those creative scenarios that their parents and other adults nurtured, the conditions were clear: egalitarian impulses were encouraged, participation was expected, and they exercised leadership in a collective way. This was the other emergent story, the one filled with light and juxtaposed with the basement experience.

Back home in South Texas, the Guajardos lived in the federal housing projects, where they enjoyed a rich experience. They grew up and learned with other kids about leadership, teamwork, organization, and fun through the act of play. They organized their summer baseball league, fall football activities, winter basketball games, and *trompos* (tops) and *canicas* (marbles) tournaments held throughout the year. The youth who participated in these activities organized, implemented, and took care of the play. They talked about which kids would play on which teams; they secured hoes, shovels, hammers, and nails from their parents to level off the baseball infield; they mounted an old bicycle rim to a basketball backboard; and they trimmed a grass line for the goal-line gridiron. They created schedules and gathered enough money to buy balls, bats, or gloves they might need for the season. They self-organized their own play and their team sports activities. In so doing, they owned every part of the process and enjoyed it in the deepest way possible. These formative stories kindled their interest in community leadership.

When they left home to go to college in the early 1980s, Miguel and Francisco took their friends from their hometowns of Elsa and Edcouch and found friends from other parts of the world. While in college, they began to shape the story that one day they would come back home to take part in rebuilding their community. The dream became clearer after college, when they returned. They came back with a renewed sense of self and were a little more global in their thinking; they had grown up a bit more at the university in the big city, had studied abroad, and traveled to several continents of the world. By the early 1990s, their love for their hometown, devotion to the stories of their childhood, and lessons learned from their formal studies and travels all melded into a clearer vision. The vision gained greater clarity in classrooms at Edcouch-Elsa High School, when they began to enact some of their lifelong ideas—ideas about building their own stories as individuals and members of a community, and doing that with students through the use of specific curricular and pedagogical approaches.

They claim that coming back home was a gift, just as it was a challenge and an opportunity. Their upbringing had taught them the power of stories, the wisdom and compassion of the people, and the charm in the narrative of the town. In their context, that was the hidden opportunity. The challenge was that most townspeople did not see their story as a source of personal power or as an asset, nor did they view their community as a unique and special place. Students at the high school reflected this perspective, as they were mired in a notion that they could not dream big about going to college. The sense of low expectations was palpable and even seemed endemic. To be sure, much of this stemmed from the socio-economic condition and isolation of the community and region.

For more than a generation this region had earned the dubious distinction as the most economically impoverished area in the country, and the steady influx of immigration from south of the Texas–Mexican border continued (and continues) to populate the region with people of limited economic or other material means. From a regional perspective, the place had gained a clear identity as a result of a century-long agri-business economy that essentially defined a two-tiered economic and social structure comprising (a) a ruling class and (b) a working class. The Guajardos were raised in and were full participants in the two-tiered structure of working the agricultural fields and were shaped by that reality.

This two-tiered setting nurtured a dominant narrative in their community. It was a narrative of power, where the landowners and farmers wielded the power and manual workers followed the orders of the powerful. The power dynamic was also largely informed by race, as Anglos (Whites) constituted the vast majority of the ruling class, while the Mexicans and Mexican Americans populated the working class. Social structures and life similarly reflected the two-tiered system in ways that starkly resembled the social and political rules of the Jim Crow American South, where segregation reigned supreme. There was the school for White children and the "Mexican" school; there was the White theater and the Cine

Mexicano. This was as much the South as it was the American Southwest. The economic and social conditions supported the dominant narrative. In that narrative, Mexican and Mexican American children were not encouraged to think about going to college, much less an exclusive college—that notion was antithetical to the dominant narrative.

Slowly, however, that narrative began to crack. For the Guajardos this happened too slowly. Even as Mexican American students began to attend college, they typically did so as a gradual step; that is, they only thought about the possibility of going to technical school or to the local college. In this emerging story of college, there was little space to leap far beyond the base expectation. The psychological impact of the two-tiered society engrained, in the minds and souls of many local people, the idea that they could not reach high, that they could not dream big. This was an insidious social construction that had to be reversed. The Guajardo vision was governed by the stories they heard as children, stories generated through the same social and economic structures, but told and understood in radically different ways. It was told to them as a counter-story. This was the other side of the dominant narrative, the part they were exposed to in their upbringing.

The counter-story was the goods their parents and others elders shared with them. The elders told about how they worked tirelessly to clear the tough South Texas brush to build new towns. They told stories of how they worked the fields in order to feed their families, but also to feed an entire nation during wartime. They heard stories of hard working people who persevered in the face of adversity, raised healthy and well-adjusted families, and participated in most facets of social and civic life. The range of stories was impressive, as they were delivered through multiple *pláticas* told as jokes, songs, poems and, as their father called them, "*tragedias y comedias*" (tragedies and comedies). They were told around the dinner table, on the front porch, and sometimes at the local coffee shop. On occasion, they learned from stories transmitted through the radio, though they were often filtered through their parents. These were genuine stories of the human spirit. They were real "American" stories.

This part of the narrative was not typically talked about in schools, or in the popular media, nor were they reflected in the market culture. But this was the uplifting part of the broader narrative, the part that could inspire children and elders, and move communities that had been mired in social and economic degradation toward a new and more enlightened existence. The challenge was to rehabilitate the dominant narrative, and they saw the school as an appropriate laboratory through which to do so. They felt a responsibility to employ the lessons learned from their elders, from the rest of the community, and through their higher education experience. They would use the combination of these lessons to build a formal pedagogy that would also become a community development strategy.

Family History and Story to the Re-imagined Community Organization

Miguel and Francisco Guajardo felt the need to take a big leap if they were to change the community story in a bold way. The challenge was to use the stories of community knowledge, wisdom, and strengths to cultivate a new kind of expectation for students and, by extension, raise the collective level of expectation of the community. In this context, the Llano Grande Center was born. Llano Grande began as a college preparation program to prepare students so they could get into schools such as Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Stanford, and MIT. Through Llano Grande the Guajardos built a curriculum grounded in the exploration of story, identity formation, and community-based research, and used this as the curricular framework through which students learned the three *Rs*. They believed that students from this South Texas community, many of whom came from immigrant and/or migrant families, possessed the talent and ability to do well in the best colleges in the country. They just had to believe they could.

More than two decades later, after placing dozens of students in Ivy League universities, and after raising the college-bound rate of graduating seniors from Edcouch-Elsa High School by more than 100%, the narrative shifted. In the new millennium local youth feel as if they have the permission to dream big about where to go to college and what they want to do with their lives. As importantly, many students now view their community as a place with value, and many imagine better days to come. The old two-tiered story has given way to a more egalitarian social and economic construct wherein more local residents, including youth, participate in the life of their community. The story of the two-tiered structure was driven by a few who made decisions about economy, education, and local policy. The new narrative is an emerging model where collective action and leadership are much more respected as modalities through which community change is exacted.

The story of the Llano Grande is the story of building power, a narrative that departs from a controlling and debilitating scheme that benefitted only a few to a system that values deeper participation by a greater number of people. The new narrative is built on the strengths and wisdom of local people, both young and old, and affirmatively positions those who have been historically marginalized at the center of constructing new meaning.

Llano Grande: A Story of Community Growth and Power

> A few years ago I went to a Community Learning Exchange with a group of local parents. It was held in South Texas, and it was the experience that initiated a lot of the changes in our communities, changes that have now spread county-wide," said a CLE alumna who worked with a group of South Texas residents to change the political behavior of county government. He added, "We learned how to build our team so that would advocate for a bond issue to build new schools. We accomplished our goals to build new schools. Today, we're changing how we invest vast resources that impact well over a million people in this county."

The preceding vignette was born out of the experience of a rural community in South Texas in the midst of unprecedented growth and rapid social change. The story is also a product of the evolving work of the Llano Grande Center. The mission was to place students from this high school in college, even the best colleges in the country. Llano Grande quickly gained national renown as dozens of students, largely Mexican American youth, gained admission into Ivy League and other prestigious universities. By the mid-1990s the organization transformed its college preparation toward work focused on building academic and other critical skills for college through a place-based curriculum centered on the lives of students and the local community. In such a curricular approach, the process of teaching and learning revolved around helping students understand their personal, family, and community stories. Social studies and language arts classes looked at building critical thinking, writing, and other communication skills through careful study of people, events, and significant entities located in the community. Science and math classes similarly investigated local flora, fauna, and climate; looked at the width and height of physical structures; and closely observed other local assets as a way to learn how to compute, read and write, understand climate, and appreciate science. More importantly, the curiosity and imagination of children and educators alike were nurtured through a methodology that valued the people and community of children and adults involved in the teaching and learning (see *Video Links* for video about the Llano Grande Center).

Within a few years after its founding, Llano Grande acquired a property with renowned education anthropologist Enrique Trueba. After retiring as a distinguished professor at the University of Texas at Austin, Trueba moved to South Texas to immerse himself in the work of Llano Grande. Since the late 1990s, the Llano Grande property has served as a training ground for local educators, community activists, and nonprofit leaders from across the country.

Llano Grande operates on the understanding that when students learn their own reality through a process of critical self-reflection, they can use that realization as a source of strength and as an advantage to gain access to higher education. Students learned through exercises in writing and storytelling, listening to stories of others, and collecting oral histories from community elders. Understanding oneself emerged as a centerpiece of the Llano Grande theory of change, a theory embraced and used by the CLE that incubates the "self" in the middle of the "ecologies of knowing." The "organization" and the "community" comprise two other "ecologies of knowing," and form the other cornerstones of the place-based curriculum. Through this course of youth development, students understand how

PHOTO 1.2 Painting of Llano Grande House by Brenda Engel.

Source: Brenda Engel. Used with permission.

to build their story. They learn how to nurture relationships and work to build personal and other local assets, helping them gain value and appreciation for the place in which they live—their community. This place-based approach to college preparation gained significant success and traction locally as national foundations saw this work in South Texas as a model to share across the country, and possibly replicate in willing communities.

Llano Grande parlayed the success of its college preparation program into its emerging leadership and community development initiatives. As it began to work with schools and communities across the region and eventually in other parts of the country, the organization stayed close to it philosophical roots—understand yourself first, then work to understand the organization and the community. The early work on community leadership development with other local partners posed challenges, primarily because participants involved in leadership development typically wanted to leap into project planning and implementation. The way of the Llano Grande called for more formative work focused on building the self, building relationships, and building trust with others. Just as going inward proved to be an effective strategy toward college preparation with high school students, the organization believed it imperative that community leadership participants pursue a similar approach.

When Llano Grande entered its first community leadership program, it ensured conditions were ripe for healthy community building. As it worked with 25 participants in its leadership program, the organization scheduled several months of community building exercises through which participants were strategically led to share their life stories with each other. The result was the formation of trusting relationships between leadership program participants. Exercises in understanding local history and culture were similarly practiced so that participants gained clarity about local context and ecology. When leadership participants embarked upon the study and review of local issues, the conditions for community change work had been established. People knew and trusted each other, and they had a working understanding of context. Participants were engaged in a community of practice, because they participated in building leadership for community change.

Summary

Regardless of their specific use at any given time, the narratives in this book also represent a simple affirmation: our stories and our histories matter. Stories matter because they serve as our primary way of making sense of our world. Stories matter because they help us build and sustain relationships. Stories matter because they inform us about place. And stories matter because they help us see possibilities and hope beneath layers of despair. They help us find courage when we are frightened. And stories help us find agency when we feel powerless.

These genealogical narratives of the Community Learning Exchange and the experiences and histories that have given birth to it serve many functions. The accounts of the Guajardo family history, the Llano Grande Center, community practices of indigenous cultures, and the work of Myles Horton and the Highlander Folk School all serve as rich sources for the CLE theory of change, and the ecologies of knowing. At the same time, these same stories can be used to illustrate axiomatic aspects of the CLE work because they most certainly have informed them. Inversely, we believe that these stories should also be used as a context through which a deeper meaning of the Community Learning Exchange can be made.

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2

MEANING MAKING, AXIOMS, AND ECOLOGIES FOR ENGAGEMENT

We come to this work acknowledging the power of place and the wisdom of people; we are educators, activist academics, and parents. We bring our experiences and remember the spirit of our childhood. This spirit includes the view that play is children's work and is at the heart of how we engage, activate, and build relationships that then nourish our individual and collective development. Fun is at the core of engagement and engagement is a core value of the CLE work highlighted in this text. We have lived the reality that when people are invited to share their stories as they author themselves, their wisdom radiates with excitement in a public way. Certainly the intensity and complexity of our realities vary, but the building elements of learning and teaching in public remain the same. This public and collective learning yields a power that is inviting and contagious.

Importance of Meaning Making

At the CLE, we are deliberate about how we inform and navigate the learning and meaning-making process. Emerging from our understanding that relationships are central to our work through the CLE, we begin from the shared belief and conception that the learning process is first and foremost social. We manage this stage by inviting teams to participate in a CLE. We deviate from the individual framing of this learning experience because we are deliberate about maximizing the social aspect of the learning experiences. When attending an event as a team, we also maximize the opportunity for conversation, reflection, and exploration. This is a benefit of the collective leadership process. Vygotsky tells us that we experience an event twice, first socially and then cognitively. As we scaffold the meaning-making process at the CLE, we add to this experience by expanding the social aspects of

learning by designing and engaging in a dynamic, generative learning experience. It is through the relationships being developed that the cognitive experience of co-constructing knowledge occurs. This social and cognitive learning process is informed by opportunities to story the experiences, reflect upon the experience, re-author or re-narrate the experience and, finally, act on the experience. Within this final, crucial component of the learning experience the technical aspects concerning *how* we act upon ourselves, our families, our organizations, our institutions, and our communities begin to take form. This, too, is a deeply collaborative process in which the approaches, strategies, and solutions that arise from the individual, idiosyncratic imaginations and contexts of the participants are shared, in order to form a composite set of robust options and opportunities that these individual teams can then take back with them and enact within themselves, their organizations, and their communities.

When convening a CLE, participants bring their stories, experiences, questions, and passions to the gathering. The CLE uses the organic elements of our guiding axioms and transfers them to a place of hosting. Through the collective process of bringing these axioms to life, the CLE becomes a process for convening diverse groups of people and ideas across traditional and artificial boundaries including places, cultures, ages, and realities. The meaning-making process of a CLE begins well before teams of participants show up to the CLE. The planning process is collaborative, generative, and dialogical. The process, from beginning to end and beyond (i.e., debriefing of the engagement experience and implementation of action plans), is deliberate and designed to continuously nurture conversations intended to help participants explore, change, and grow. This engagement process—or pedagogy, if you will—is effective when we help develop a schema for participants to organize conversations conceptually, name experiences, make meaning of these experiences, and act upon them. We use the axioms of the CLE below to nurture this process and inform the learning. We acknowledge the CLE process described earlier departs from the traditional educational experiences many of us have lived in public institutions. However, it is this critically important departure that allows for the organic experiences of the CLE to be brought to life.

Axioms That Guide the Work

At the core of the work are five axioms. We believe these concepts to be truths that form the core of the CLE value system. We use these *axioms* here in purposeful ways. The axioms frame the beginning of the work, and they also become evident through experiencing a CLE. Borrowing its meaning within its uses in modern logic, an axiom can be thought of *as a beginning* or starting point. The work of the CLE begins with these guiding values, though the use of the axioms also transcends the calculating constraints of modern logic that would limit them as simply the beginning of the work of the CLE.

We reach for a deeper meaning of axioms used by philosophers in ancient Greece. For them and for us, an axiom is a truth without any need for proof in the form of linear logic. For us, these *axioms are established by means of real, lived experiences.* When friends, family, and other community members want to learn about the CLE, we can describe the process and we can share these axioms, but it is only through experiencing a CLE that these axioms first become true and real.

The core values represented by these axioms permeate boundaries while guiding thought, practice, and relationships. They are always at work in a circular, non-linear way. The CLE work is neither a project nor an isolated event—*it is a way of life.* The rest of this chapter is the scaffolding to the meaning-making process we employ at the CLE. We seek here to help the reader make the best sense of this social innovation and the life that emerges when at work within a CLE, in absence of having yet truly experienced it.

In our attempt to approximate the experience of the CLE, we use stories in this book to reveal how these axioms can be a guiding force, a way of life. While living

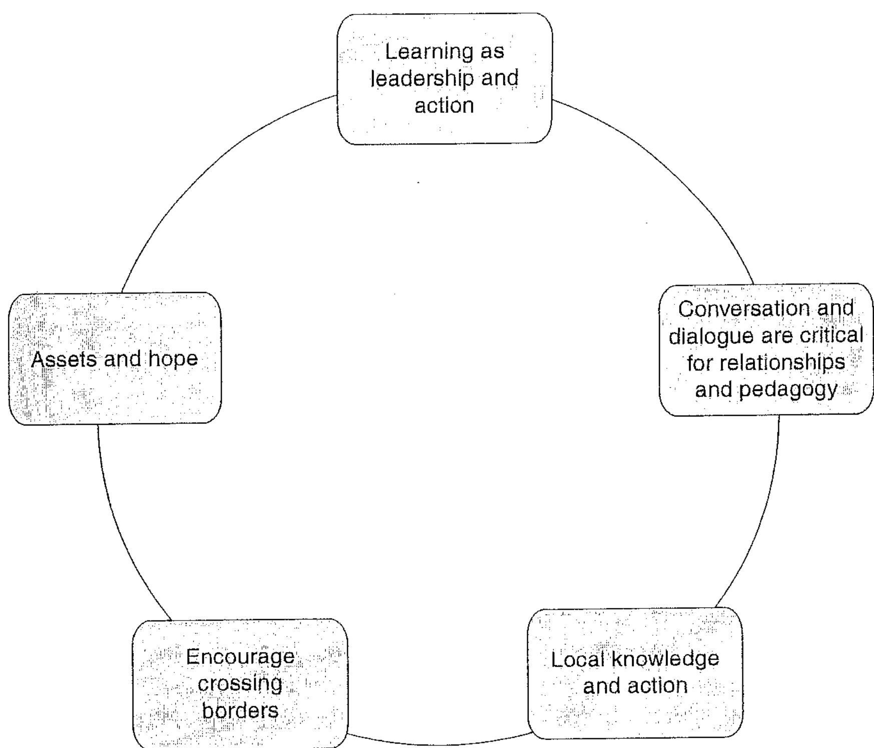

FIGURE 2.1 CLE axioms

by these axioms does not always guarantee success, it does provide an opportunity to expand our understanding of the world in a dignified way. A working understanding and acceptance of this way of living yields an opportunity to notice events, conversations, and invitations we have not noticed before developing this awareness. A working understanding and acceptance of this way of living also yields the consciousness and spirit needed to design and nurture the work of the CLE for others to experience first so that they can live it too.

Learning and Leadership Are a Dynamic Social Process

Organizers of the CLE believe learning is a leadership act and that leadership is at its best when it is in collaborative action. This duality informs the dynamic nature of the pedagogical process. All participants have something to contribute, and they are active in framing their learning. This includes the stories they exchange; the conversations they share; the questions they frame; and the action plans they construct for themselves, their organizations, and their community. We see shared learning as the foundational action for the development and sustainability of human beings and the improvement of their social, economic, and political condition.

Learning how to learn within the context of relationships is at the core of leadership and the construction of the necessary conditions that nurture this development in an inviting and dignified manner. Learning emerging from, and within, relationships is supported and nurtured through a number of signature CLE pedagogies and is limited only by the distinct needs of the collective and the imaginations of the designers. Among the pedagogies, we have found that play provides distinct and powerful opportunities to support the development of relationships that transcend gender, culture, and generations. Not only does play allow us to connect to our universal "child" and the wonder and enthusiasm of seeing things with fresh eyes but it does so in democratizing ways.

Conversations Are Critical and Central Pedagogical Processes

At the core of social learning theory is the need to create safe spaces and healthy relationships for participants, learners, and teachers alike to share their stories. Relationships are the first point of contact in the learning process, and storytelling and conversation are the mediating tools. If the climate, spirit, and interaction between participants, facilitator, and/or their environment are not inviting and safe, it is difficult for sustainable and public learning to take place. This space is critically important for honest conversation and storytelling. It allows CLE participants to trust their story has value and will be respected. This safe space allows for critical points of view to be presented; this relational space invites the storytelling process and authentic, challenging conversation to take place.

The building blocks of CLE pedagogy include safe environment, storytelling, conversations, and relationships. This foundation of engagement helps participants develop and move to finding or building their voice toward action. Our challenge is to help co-create space to explore, imagine, and create alternative realities within the familiar. It is through our relationships with others that we change, grow, and develop. CLE pedagogies are designed to maximize opportunity and encouragement in order to build new relationships and nurture existing ones. Along with storytelling and conversations, there is an art to how we frame questions before, during, and after the CLE. Questions are used to encourage participants to see hidden personal strengths, to understand new possibilities, and to discover previously buried assets. Taken in full, conversations using questions and stories purposefully to support participant development and greater understanding of their situations within their home communities can yield healthy change.

The People Closest to the Issues Are Best Situated to Discover Answers to Local Concerns

As the CLE organizes around a certain topic, participants are invited and expected to engage with each other through sharing their individual and community stories and experiences around the CLE topic. Such engagement fosters a creative agency that helps people find their power and voice, and the process responds to the need for local communities to own their destiny, though not in an individualistic manner. On the contrary, theirs is a collective destiny. This collective process puts the power back into the hands of the people most impacted by the conditions and decision of the day. Here, the learning processes and experiences are developed in order to frame questions, conversations, and other pedagogical activities in age-appropriate, context-responsive, and culturally sustainable ways.

The CLE organizers believe people residing in local communities know the issues first hand and therefore need to be fully involved in constructing the organizing focus and selecting the pedagogies to these issues. We do not intend to oversimplify this process and suggest that, if they simply show up, CLE participants will magically find the answers. However, we do know that when people share their stories in public with those who have similar experiences from different communities, from different generations, or with different gifts, a collective and creative energy and focus take shape.

This collective and creative deviance takes place in a variety of crucial ways. First and foremost, the CLE provides opportunities for participants and their teams to return to their local communities prepared to deviate from the approaches, strategies, and actions that have not yielded the results and development. In doing so, these returning CLE participants infuse new ideas and possibilities into their

home communities. This interjection of new hopes, approaches, strategies, and actions are innovations within these communities that can then spread contagiously to other community members, organizations, and institutions. Notably, the process by which participants and their teams have arrived at these new approaches, strategies, and actions is usually a deviation from how they have been developed in the past. Rather than isolated initiatives *acting on* community and largely informed by those learning, working, and living within it, the process of community change is now conceptualized as a collective endeavor in which the former CLE participants work to ensure that they are *acting with* their communities and the diverse perspectives and gifts within them. In sum, the CLE holds the potential to transform the *how* of community change, thus shifting the traditional, consolidated power dynamic to a collective action.

Crossing Boundaries Enriches the Development and Educational Process

The ability and willingness to experience a world that is outside our daily comfort zone is necessary to break the isolation of people, teams, and organizations. This dynamic is familiar and easier to comprehend when we invite teams to join national CLEs, but it becomes more difficult to articulate when we host local CLEs. The traditional border crossing we reference includes but is not limited to geographic borders; economic borders; age, culture, and racial borders; gender; faith; and differing abilities.

This border-crossing concept becomes more difficult to notice and articulate when everyone in the room looks like each other and lives in the same community, including the facilitators. Within this context, the facilitators' ability to make the familiar strange is important. This process happens when the meeting place and space is altered; the teaching is shifted from traditional lecture mode to one that is dialogical, experiential, collaborative, and engaged. This border crossing of ideas, questions, and learning processes is critically important to decenter the status quo and the traditional ways of knowing. This shift begins to rupture the comfort, status quo, and equilibrium we reach when a generative and dynamic conversation is missing from our institutional lives. This shift is also a move toward expanding our curiosity and imagination.

This process begins to invite and excite the curiosity of the learners. When community members are presented with a different language, mannerisms, and questions, they begin to accept the challenge to engage in the behavior themselves and construct their own questions. Even if they are not versed to frame specific questions, the invitation to express and exercise essential human curiosity is enough to begin. This is the magic of going to different places physically, emotionally, intellectually, and relationally. We witness this, too, with CLE participants.

Hope and Change Are Built on Assets and Dreams of Locals and their Communities

We have learned that when CLE participants tell their own story, they begin to map their gifts, ideas, hopes, and wishes. This mapping includes ideological, relational, and geographical skills, riches, wishes, and assets. The identification, naming, and construction of these assets invite CLE participants to view their work and their community in different ways. Issues that have historically been assumptions immediately become opportunities, invitations, and points of action. Transforming one's mind and consciousness from distress and hopelessness to hope and possibilities is, by definition, the most radical transformation we witness during the CLE experience. The exchange gives participants a new language, a different way of looking at the world, and a network of support that expands their community of practice while simultaneously breaking the isolation. In short, this reframing of our daily conditions from deficits to assets helps build hope and possibilities.

Moreover, this border-crossing within a semi-structured environment of a CLE becomes a space full of possibilities. Community members begin to develop a language that describes their experiences. They do so by using stories and imagination to both examine and reimagine their lived experiences and, thus, create alternate and multiple future possibilities.

Ecologies of Knowing

By the end of the CLE, participants experience a wide range of conversations, relationships, field site visits, questions, epiphanies, and moments of tension. These encounters test the multiple pieces of knowledge we rarely make public or export in traditional educational settings, including the cognitive, emotional, relational, critical, cultural, and historical. This intense engagement can push anyone into sensory overload, but we attempt to balance and navigate the learning within the following ecologies. We know that not all CLE participants will understand and/or utilize this framework, because we are all at different levels of our own development. However, the CLE organizers work to balance the learning within three central ecologies of knowing: self, organizations, and communities.

These three ecologies organize our thinking and learning experiences from the micro to the meso and on to the macro levels, or spheres, in which we experience life. Like life itself, these ecologies are bordered by permeable boundaries that leave room for exchange and interplay, but serve their purpose when making meaning of the engagement before, during, and after the CLE. These ecologies are not isolated. They spiral inward and upward, weaving within a developmental process as our experiences inform our schema. The visual representation is a top view, but looking at this process from a side view, one can also see an image of a cone with a spiral-connecting strand from the bottom foundation to the tip

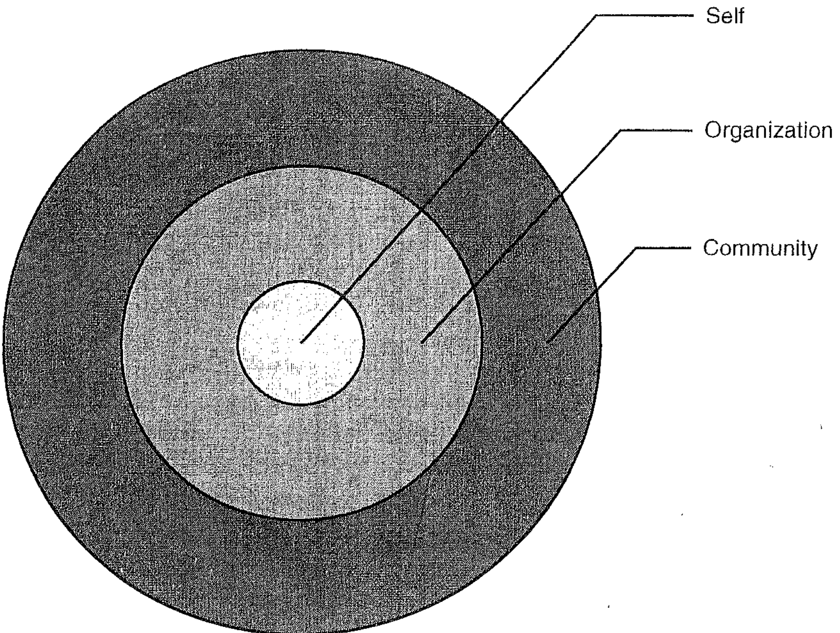

FIGURE 2.2 Ecologies of knowing

at the top of the cone, or the bottom, depending on your position of privilege or perspective. This spiral weaves the ecologies and our lived experiences into a cohesive yet developmental complexity that is both simple and dynamic in its construction.

Self

As learners, the self is the basis of the world of knowing. Within a collective leadership philosophy that we have framed and practiced, there is a constant balance, or tension, between the "I" and the "we." This is not presented as a binary but rather as a space that is both "I" and "we" at once, yet still a third space all the time. To negotiate this dynamic space, it is important that the individual have a solid foundation. This foundation includes the ability to filter information and make decisions in the best interest of the self and the organization. To accomplish this, the leaders must be in rhythm with their multiple ecologies.

We also believe that our individual constructions of self are invariably and essentially informed by our families. It is within our families that our sense of the collective first forms. We learn that others are necessary to meet our needs, and that it is through our relationships with others that we grow, change, and develop.

We also learn through family that we grow and develop through our relationships, not only from what we receive, but also from what we give. Family is the original learning exchange for us. It is the context for our learning about the self and also about the social world around us. As such, we see profound value in the native Hawaiian saying shared with us that to first understand our roles in society, we must first understand our roles in our family. To push that relationship even further, we have observed, learned, and experienced that our families shape who we are and both inform and are informed by the world—a dynamic that is shaped and sharpened by the CLE.

Organization

This meso frame is critical to honor our commitment to being a public people. We grow up in organizations and as educators know families, schools, churches, and other social collectives become mediating entities between the self and the larger society. These institutions and groups are critical to welcoming young people to the world, and the CLE plays this role for youth and adults alike. The CLE also serves as a mediating force for participants between many variables. It mediates between old understandings and new conceptions; passivity and engagement; obedience and empowerment; the status quo and a life of action; and, ultimately, oppression and liberation in a dynamic way.

Community

The world at the macro level impacts our daily lives in good and stressful ways. Knowing the flow of forces and locations of power in our lives and communities is important in informing our work and action plans and the hope that life can change. As we have written before, to know that there is dialogue between the micro and the macro in a reciprocal way is valuable in informing our future actions and questions. This is an empowering dialogue that communicates and makes known our abilities to bring about change in our communities and world if we act collectively with one another. This understanding shifts the relationship with community from an external and immutable constraint to a web of interwoven relationships that can be influenced to become more nurturing and just. It is within community that we live and grow, so the healthier our communities, the more effective and just nurturers they become.

Weaving and Scaffolding the Ecologies

The ability to negotiate the ecologies in a seamless way requires an understanding of relationships and knowing of each other's stories. In a CLE, we have learned that asking the right questions is more important than having the answers. When we

ask the right questions, CLE participants will find answers or a process informing where to go to uncover their need to learn and subsequently explore future inquiry. The weaving of the ecologies becomes a developmental process where we learn to make meaning of private and public experiences cognitively, emotionally, and in a relational way with the world. This spiral process is simultaneously generative and summative in a human and community development manner.

Summary

The Community Learning Exchange, although first experienced as an event occurring in an afternoon, day, or series of days, is much more than an isolated project or event: *It is a way of life*. Specifically, it is a way of life that challenges our thoughts, actions, practices, and relationships so that they might better support the development of healthier selves, organizations, and communities. It is a way of life that proposes *we learn best from real, lived experiences, and authentic and honest relationships*.

Working from the fundamental and radical assumption that the people closest to the issues are those best situated to address those issues and discover answers to the concerns that arise from them, the CLE invites us to experience and live through relationships that allow us to experience learning and leading as dynamic social processes, and have conversations for pedagogical purposes. When people participate in CLEs, they explore how they can cross boundaries in efforts to collectively construct solutions for organizational and community challenges that unfetter and mobilize the assets, strengths, and dreams of community members. These efforts toward collective solutions developed to generate constructive and equitable changes in organizations and communities are supported by the five axioms of the Community Learning Exchange and framed within our three ecologies of knowing. These axiomatic principles become even more self-evident when lived and experienced, and the ecologies of knowing allow for the CLE participants to perceive and understand the various levels in which they are experiencing the problems they have, the challenges they face, and the way their lives are impacted and shaped by those problems and challenges. However, although the Community Learning Exchange begins with foundational axioms and ways of understanding the ecologies of our lives and experiences, because the goals of the CLE and those who form and attend them are to impact and change their circumstances and institutions that shape them, something else is needed. For participants at a CLE to engage in change processes for their organizations and communities, an understanding, a theory, of change is essential. In the next chapter, the Community Learning Exchange theory of change, developed from the efforts and engagement of the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development, is described and explored.

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3

A THEORY OF CHANGE IN ACTION

The Community Learning Exchange (CLE) theory of change values relationships, assets, and places. Building community through such a theory of change and action anchors the work of the CLE and portends a community-building approach that moves away from community development based on deficit thinking models. Beyond the three ecologies, the CLE encourages schools and community-based organizations to look at issues of curriculum and pedagogies situated in the local context. Schools across the country that have become immersed in the work of the CLE have transformed themselves into places of innovation where teachers, students, and parents can work together to improve their hometowns. As a result, communities and schools have been better for it. Teaching and learning processes have focused on building community-based enterprises and on creating safe spaces where local residents can speak honestly on issues of race, class, gender, and other critical issues facing communities. Schools and non-profit organizations have partnered to build strong learning action teams and the public will to pass bond issues to build new schools, improve local and regional infrastructures, and address issues of wellness.

Community leadership and community change are complex propositions. People come and go, organizations come and go, and businesses change; the result is that communities, even the most remote, are in constant flux. The Community Learning Exchange theory of change attempts to understand the complexities of change as it looks at the formation of community leadership. Throughout the course of this book, the readers sees elements of the CLE theory of change and action. Early in the book, the critical nature and vitality of *relationships* are emphasized as essential to the life of the CLE. The spirit of the CLE experience is guided by the necessity to find what is good in people and communities. We call this

assets-based development. *Stories* become the strategy and practice through which we identify assets, and stories tell us how those assets are developed. Community, or *place*, incubates the assets and stories, and becomes the nexus through which all these elements are enacted. The confluence of the elements is guided by a particular *politic*, or ethic of behavior, which is built on trust and works for the public good to ultimately lead to *action*. These dynamics define the CLE theory of change, or RASPPA: Relationships, Assets, Stories, Place, Politic, and Action.

RASPPA: Relationships, Assets, Stories, Place, Politic, and Action

Relationships

The CLE theory of change weaves a collection of layers that interact with elements that are foundational to both understanding and engaging in the process of community change. We glean critical lessons that help us situate the importance of relationships at the center of our thinking on change. Just about everything related to CLE is predicated on the need to invest in building healthy relationships. Without that investment, it is difficult to build trust. Likewise, without trust, it is difficult to build community. Thus, the CLE process begins with the need to build relationships. Pedagogies employed throughout the process lead toward building deeper relationships. Storytelling begets trust; trust begets healthy relationships; healthy relationships beget effective organizations; and effective organizations beget strong communities. Purposeful investment in building relationships is foundational to this work.

The relationship-building efforts during a CLE are supported by the use of Gracious Space. Gracious Space is *a spirit and setting where there is an invitation to the stranger and learning occurs in public.* The Center for Ethical Leadership employs Gracious Spaces to create a climate for deeper listening and understanding. It also helps move relationships beyond the objectives of investment and trust. Investment and trust are critical to the kinds of relationships we want to grow and develop. The growth and development we need best occurs when we trust each other enough, and when we challenge ourselves to live in closer alignment with our life-sustaining principles and values.

Assets

Community leadership teaches us that identifying and building assets is important to understanding and building community. Assets-based development moves us away from deficit-based development that typically crushes the spirit of community. Others involved in human development have observed and commented that when we focus on problems and deficiencies, the problems and deficiencies become larger. When we focus on assets, strengths and

solutions, then there is hope. Our communities and the people and families within them need larger and more plentiful assets, strengths, and solutions. By focusing on those community and organizational gifts that already exist, people within those communities and organizations discover their gifts. When we help identify and build the strengths of individuals and communities, everyone feels better about their work. Assets-based community and leadership development inspires people to work together and fosters a spiritual quality that invites community members to the work of community building.

Stories

"I may not own the store," said a CLE participant, "but I totally own my story." An inherent curiosity runs through the work of the CLE. People are curious to know about each other, to know their stories. There is a discipline to this kind of leadership and community development process that requires that individuals find and nurture their own stories. "What's your story?" is a common question posed during the course of a learning exchange. The CLE process encourages everyone to know their individual, their organizational, and their community story. We understand that everyone has a story to tell—even communities have stories to tell—and so the idea of story emerges as an important element in the CLE theory of change and action.

We also know that too often individuals, their organizations, and their communities learn very distorted stories about themselves that have been developed and propagated by those who do not really understand or value them. The role of story during a CLE is both deconstructive and constructive. Participants are invited and challenged to tell their stories, and to examine and decode origins and content. Who did they learn their stories from? Who benefits from their current stories? Who is empowered by them? Are there exceptions to their stories? Are there alternative stories? CLE participants are encouraged to affirm that stories are best when they are owned. And as their most valuable resources they can be re-framed, re-told, and re-shaped to best support their empowerment, agency, and ultimately, their dreams.

Place

Place is a physical location, but it is a process too. The CLE practices place-based teaching, learning, and community and leadership development. Each participant is asked to think about the place they call home, the place that nurtures their curiosity, and the place that inspires their imagination. Place-based pedagogies emerge as prominent, as the CLE process encourages participants to think about the history, the values, and the importance of their communities. Place is

important because each community has unique strengths, assets, and gifts, along with the stories that exemplify and illustrate them. Places also have distinct histories and dynamics that need to be understood if efforts to change them are to be successful and just. The understanding of the histories and dynamics of a place is a process worth learning about itself, and that process can only be learned and the skills that support that learning only developed from the real contexts of real places. During a CLE, participants learn about the importance of place within communities that may not even be their own. CLE participants learn about the ecology of place, history, and politics as the necessary conditions to inform the future of their work.

As much as we view community through a critical lens, the CLE similarly encourages us to view community as a place to build, and play, and celebrate. The CLE situates the notion of place at the center of the teaching and learning process. It formalizes community, or place, as a critical ingredient in a theory of change, while also celebrating the rich pageantry of neighborhood and community.

Politic

Behavior intended for the public good characterizes the emerging politic cultivated through CLEs. This is not about "I scratch your back, you scratch mine" behavior; instead, it is about a relational process focused on acting for the betterment of the self, the organization, and the community. Doing the public good is the ethical proposition that guides the workings of the CLE. Politic embodies a kinetic quality, more than potential energy.

Action

A theory of change needs a catalytic quality. Principles that are static and remain in the abstract satisfy the meaning of theory, but a theory in action requires that relationships, assets, stories, and place have movement. Hence, a common question posed during CLEs is, "Does the story have legs?" Stories can possess an aesthetic quality, but in efforts to build community, stories must do more. They must inspire, motivate, and move citizens to act toward the public good.

Building RASPPA

CLEs pose similar questions related to relationships, assets, and place. From a symbolic standpoint reminiscent of the life and culture of South Texas, we use the acronym RASPPA (Relationships, Assets, Stories, Place, Politic, Action); the word *raspa* means "snow cone," a favorite refreshment for local kids and adults alike—and we hope the CLE will be comparably appreciated by all.

The RASPPA model holds our theory of change together. It weaves fundamental principles of relationships, assets, stories, places, politics, and actions with three ecologies of knowing: self, organization, and community. The RASPPA principles are manifest at three levels of development, or ecologies of knowing. The first ecological space is the self, where the most profound development takes place; people change through their interaction with others as they build relationships, develop their assets, share their stories, and learn about their place. The second ecological dimension is the organization; this is where schools, community-based non-profits, universities, or private enterprises grow through the same set of interactions. The third ecological level is the community. The ecologies of knowing interplay fluidly with the principles that define the theory of change. Relationships are built between members of organizations and between members of a community. Stories are shared, nurtured, and utilized for deeper understanding of the self, the organization, and the community. Assets are identified and built through introspective work, through an organization's self-reflection, and/or community dialogues. Each principle and ecology of knowing is situated in a particular place—geographical or metaphorical. As the principles and ecologies of knowing interact, the theory of change is enacted and comes to life.

The integration of these elements along with the five axioms of the CLE value system gives shape to a framework for understanding that pushes us to move our thinking from deficits to assets as a community—a critical prerequisite to beginning to rehabilitate the collective self-esteem of many communities, and especially places that have been marginalized historically. When Llano Grande moved from noting deficits to focusing on assets, the organization better positioned itself to unfetter the immense power of community members to advocate for the bond issues that built new schools and inspired the community to vote to improve the physical infrastructure of the region.

When participants prepare for a Community Learning Exchange, they are asked to think about natural strengths, talents, and skills that are personal, organizational, and community based. "What gifts do you bring to your work in education, leadership, or community development?" is a common question posed. The search for assets encourages participants, organizations, and communities to think critically about the redeeming qualities that exist in every organization and community. The discipline of asset mapping recognizes and honors the work of elders and others who have worked to raise families, create enterprises, and lead institutions in the community. Asset mapping offers opportunities to engage organizations and communities in gaining a deeper understanding of the strengths that exist in community, and it is a requisite step to the process of building the assets identified through mapping. The CLE facilitates asset mapping, and it urges participants to think about culturally responsive and historically appropriate approaches to building those very assets.

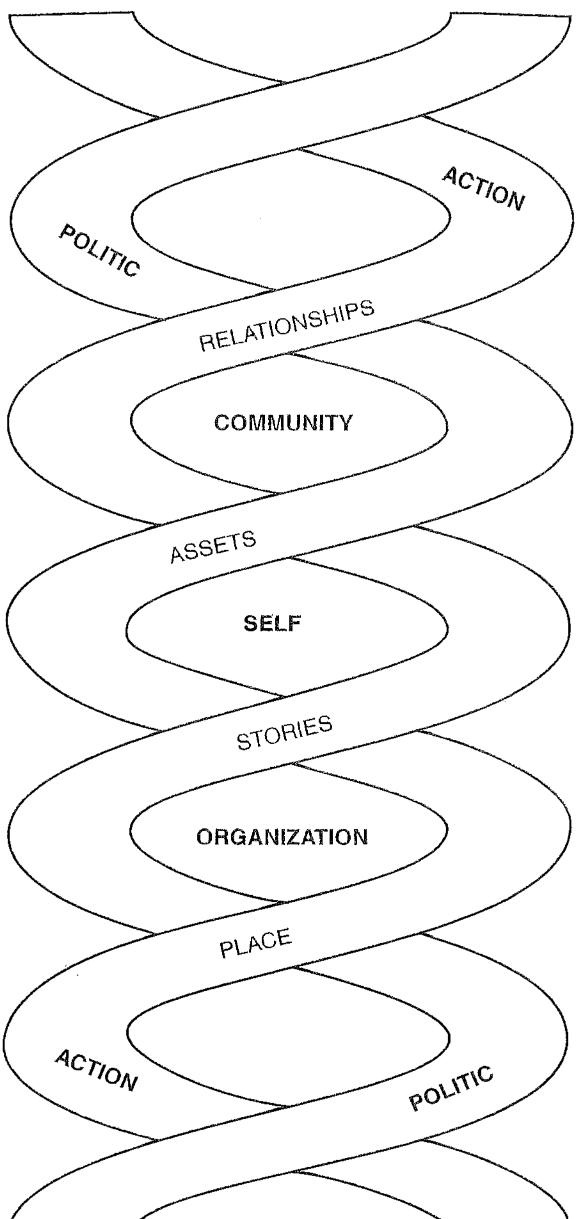

FIGURE 3.1 RASPPA

Bringing RASPPA to Life

A theory of action can be created quite easily. In 1953, U.S. Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn famously said, "Any jackass can kick down a barn door, but it takes a carpenter to build it." Likewise, the real work of the CLE resides in the action. Change requires planning for and attention toward the work that must occur. Time and training are the most often heard variables when talking about change. In our world, this translates to teaching and learning. To create change, there first needs to be a common understanding and language. Normative languages and signature CLE methods and strategies are deliberately taught, not hidden with access only for a privileged few. Next, the procedural elements of how to engage in change processes must be attended to—the process of the Community Learning Exchange must be taught and learned. Finally, change must be monitored, examined, and described with multiple metrics and perspectives and reflected upon from multiple points of view. In the work of the CLE, we use learning methods and strategies, or pedagogies, that are anchored in the CLE axioms, framed by the ecologies of knowing, and lived through RASPPA.

The term that defines the art of teaching is *pedagogy*, which is the method and action of teaching. Oddly enough, there is no word to define the art of learning. Yet there is no value to teaching without learning. Learning is developmental, idiosyncratic, and highly contextualized. That is, learning takes place at different times for different people in a variety of settings. Place, space, style, personal beliefs, experiences, and interests all intersect simultaneously. There is an art in developing awareness and critical consciousness as well as building agency at the various levels of the ecologies of knowing (self, community, and organization). This is dynamic-critical pedagogy. This does not separate learning from teaching, and vice versa. We do not want to neglect other values that support the learning and development process, nor can we set aside other elements of the CLE theory of change. Teaching and learning during a CLE must honor the full context of community and the human experiences that take place within them—place, space, family, community, policy, history, politics, play. These are important and must be attended to along with other elements valuable to informing understanding and change.

We have learned from those great educational minds who saw learning as both a cognitive and social endeavor. The canonical thinkers and the wise elders and youth in our own families teach us that the cognitive development is no more important than social and socio-cultural experiences. What a person already knows, has experienced, and likes all shapes how they will make meaning of the world. This hinges on relationships among individuals, the places they reside and work, and the families and communities they rely on. In the CLE process, deep and caring relationships matter most.

Theory in Action

In the next few chapters, we explore and learn more about how a CLE is framed and how a rhythm is developed for it. As you will learn, whether through the planning of a CLE or experiencing one, the goal of the CLE is to work toward positioning people in places where they will be successful. This begins prior to the start of the CLE, and we have found that the best engagement practices begin with the invitation. The best invitations are personal, informative, and, well, inviting.

We must be committed to making our invitations authentic, the topic or issue relevant, and the engagement process dynamic. We have found that our invitations for CLEs are most authentic when we welcome the wisdom and gifts of participants. We have also found that the topic or issues of a CLE will be relevant when they are shaped with participants, rather than brought to them without their input and collaboration. We have also found that the engagement process is dynamic when we interact with the intention of building relationships first, and engaging in learning tasks after those relationships are first honored. In that spirit, we invite you to bring your experiences of living and learning in community. In the next section, you will learn more about the Community Learning Exchange from stories of impacts on individuals, organizations, and communities. Sharing stories is the foundation of our relationships. Stories are how we communicate our experiences and our histories. Stories are also what allow us to view and understand our experiences. As you read these stories, ask yourself how you can take what you learn to better honor the spirit and power of place as well as the wisdom of people in your own communities. How can you use the five axioms of the Community Learning Exchange, the ecologies of knowing, and the theory of change in action so that you can better understand and engage in your own collective change efforts? Through our stories of the Community Learning Exchange, we invite you to dream about a new story for yourself, your family, your organization, and your community.

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