

Anti-Poverty, Community Organizing, and Learning in Response to the Mimico Secondary Plan

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Abstract: This roundtable will provide an exploratory analysis of the informal and incidental learning gained by participants in and through the process of community-based organizing in Mimico, located within the City of Toronto, Canada. The authors posit that such learning is individual, collective, and intrinsic to the people's participation.

Since 2006, the City of Toronto has been developing Mimico 20/20 (the Mimico by-the Lake Secondary Plan), a land-use and physical infrastructure plan supporting an intensification of development in the small Toronto community of Mimico. Low-income tenants of several rental buildings in the area are concerned that they will be displaced if plans go ahead.

Dr. Israt Ahmed, a Scarborough resident and senior planner with Social Planning Toronto, will make a presentation on the early stages of APCOL, an anti-poverty community organizing and learning project (APCOL, n.d.), of which she is a community partner. Its first case study, involving housing organizing in the Kingston-Galloway neighborhood, demonstrates that many people learn activism from others when they have the opportunity to participate in social action. A first step toward activism is through volunteer work in the community. Social service organizations in Toronto play an important role in connecting people with the opportunity to engage in activism; however, communities may lack suitable outlets for activism, which can lead to gaps in collective activism on structural issues. Dr. Ahmed argues that community planning and development would benefit from local-level decision-making mechanisms such as community planning boards, which can offer local knowledge and assets to inform development decisions, practices, and collective action for the greater public good.

Dr. Martin Gerwin, a Mimico resident and co-chair of the Mimico Lakeshore Network (MLN), will make a presentation on the importance of "proactive city planning," inherent in the concept of community planning. In his associations with other local groups and as co-chair of the MLN, he has found that the character and the detail of a decision on a matter of city planning is greatly affected by the process in which the decision was reached. He has also found that the City of Toronto's planning is seriously flawed in a number of ways, including:

- There are provisions for community consultation, but it is not a truly collaborative process.
- The process is not sufficiently transparent and not sufficiently inclusive.

- The process is open to manipulation by developers, and serves the interests of developers better than those of the public or of other interested parties.
- The process is distorted by the existence of the Ontario Municipal Board, to which decisions by the City may be appealed.

He notes that grass-roots groups, organized by someone *other* than the city authorities, have the capacity to rally people, give an effective voice, and enable people to discover that they *can* alter what had seemed to be an inevitable unfolding of events desired by powerful moneyed interests. Much learning of this kind has been occurring in the course of the public discussions of plans for the future of Mimico.

Abbe Edelson, Mimico resident, research assistant to APCOL, and PhD candidate (HSSSJE, OISE/UT) will present the preliminary findings of 20+ interviews with representatives from Mimico community-based organizations, local residents, and business owners who are working to influence the City of Toronto's planning process. The findings, bolstered by Ms. Edelson's activities as a resident and member of three of these local organizations, suggest that organizations within Mimico that have formed in response to the Mimico 20/20 process are dominated by a white middle class, and lack tenant participation. Ms. Edelson's exploratory presentation will discuss learning from a sociocultural perspective, which states that learning is inherent and intrinsic to cultural, historical, social, and economic processes (Leontiev, 1978; Vygotsky, 1987). The sociocultural perspective encompasses the collective as well as the individual learning that human beings engage in as part of their everyday lives. This exploratory presentation will draw upon the sociocultural learning perspective while employing a dialectical method (Ollman, 2003) to synthesize a Marxist-feminist analysis grounded in Ms. Edelson's own participation as a resident activist in Mimico.

Following the individual presentations, an interactive discussion will provide an opportunity for participants to share their experiences regarding learning in and through the process of community organizing at whatever level—neighborhood, city, state and/or provincial, national, and/or international.

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