Tell me a story: How a community-based organization learns from its history through reflective storytelling

by

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Submitted to the Department of Urban Studies and Planning
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how El Puente, a community-based organization in New York City, can become a learning organization that organizes collective actions to build power for social change. Organizations build power by reaching a balance between organizing relevant actions and creating institutions that provide legitimacy but learn to change themselves as a result of their actions. Community-based organizations remain grounded by articulating a group identity that balances the concerns of residents and the interests of members. This is achieved by building capacity and mastery with leaders.

After 15 years of organizing in Williamsburg, El Puente seeks to consolidate its program areas into an institutionalized movement for change. The challenge is how to maintain the drive for social change and not fall into a bureaucratic service model. Institutionalization demands a consistent story about the organization's history and goals. I focus on how El Puente can learn from its history to inform new actions and ensure its survival as a learning organization.

El Puente leaders tell stories that bridge the organization's history (from which they derive legitimacy) with current actions (to remain relevant) in a way that engages people and defines a group identity. Storytelling is an approach to managing organizational history that allows multiple interpretations of events, as well as creates a fluid history from which lessons can be extracted. Currently, storytelling at El Puente engages participants, solidifies group identity, transmits experiences, and celebrates victories. Learning from history through storytelling, however, necessitates more formal spaces of reflection and inquiry.

As part of the effort to institutionalize, I proposed an intervention to explore how leaders can begin to understand their history and draw explicit lessons. I argue that institutionalization does not necessarily entail changing practices but rather refining the organizational culture to meet new needs. Reflective storytelling presents an opportunity to tell stories and construct a collective history in a way that meets the needs of institutionalization while still being consistent with the oral culture. Learning from history entails understanding an organizational trajectory and the connection between actions, being able to revisit organizational goals and founding principles, identifying key symbols in the organization, and being able to critique actions that were successful as well as those that were not. In this way, reflective storytelling aims to prod participants to evaluate the history from which the organization gets its legitimacy, and to create a loop where these lessons can inform subsequent actions that remain relevant within the community.

In order to promote reflection as well as maintain legitimacy and relevance in articulating a group identity, participants must be mentored in the art of storytelling. Storytellers must learn to listen to stories, reflect on actions, and re-tell them in a way that speak to a group identity that bridges the history with current concerns. In this way, leaders are able to build a community-based organization that responds to community needs and builds power for change. Because history is important for learning, and because social change is a long process, embracing storytelling as a mechanism for building a learning organization does not take away the need to document the organization's history in media that can be studied and critiqued by new participants. Documentation, however, needs to be approached in a creative way that is consistent with the organizational culture, in the same way that reflective storytelling tries to be true to that culture.

Thesis Supervisor: David Laws
Title: Lecturer
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In memory of René Epelbaum (1921-1998), leader of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, mentor and friend, whose stories we will miss.

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What can I say about my parents Víctor and Graciela that hasn’t been said before? Thank you for everything! My brother Nico, my number one fan, knows that he is the one who rocks my world.

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My deepest gratitude and respect goes to the many people at El Puente who were very helpful and patient in submitting to my “experiments” in storytelling. They made this collective process possible and deserve credit for creating such an interesting history. I hope they realize that they are all Master Storytellers. This is their story, although the lies and mistakes are all mine.
Colibrí

In Jayuya,
the lizards scatter
like a fleet of green canoes
before the invader.
The Spanish conquered
with iron and words:
"Indio Taíno" for the people
who took life
from the rain
that rushed through trees
like evaporating arrows,
who left the rock carvings
of eyes and mouths
in perfect circles of amazement.

So the hummingbird
was christened "colibrí".
Now the colibrí
darts and bangs
between the white walls
of the hacienda,
a racing Taíno heart
frantic as if hearing
the bellowing god of gunpowder
for the first time.

The colibrí
becomes pure stillness,
seized in the paralysis
of the prey,
when your hands
cup the bird
and lift him
through the red shutters
of the window,
where he disappears
into a paradise of sky,
a nightfall of singing frogs.

If only history
were like your hands.

En Jayuya,
los lagartijos se dispersan
como una flota de canoas verdes
ante el invasor.
Los españoles conquistaron
con hierro y palabras:
"indio taíno" para el pueblo
que tomaba la vida
de la lluvia
arrojada entre los árboles
como flechas evaporándose,
ellos que dejaron huellas en la roca
de ojos y bocas
en círculos perfectos de espanto.

Y el zumbador
fue bautizado "colibrí".
Ahora el colibrí
se precipita y se estrella
entre los muros blancos
de la hacienda,
un corazón taíno agitado,
frenético como si oyera
el bramido del dios de la pólvora
por primera vez.

El colibrí,
presa paralizada,
cae en la más pura
quietud,
cuando tus manos
lo acapan
y lo alzan
por las celosías rojas
de la ventana,
donde se desaparece
en un paraíso celeste,
un anochecer de coquiés.

Si la historia
sólo fuera como tus manos.

Martín Espada, *Rebellion is the Circle of a Lover's Hands/Rebelión es el giro de manos del amante*
Cast of Characters at El Puente

Interim Leadership Circle (ILC):

Luis Garden Acosta  Founder, President and CEO
Frances Lucerna  Founder, Director, Principal of Academy
Sonia Bu  Director of Programs
Gino Maldonado  Director of Operations
Josephina Santiago  HIP Coordinator
Rossy Matos  Staff Development Coordinator
Joe Matunis  Art Facilitator (Academy)
Hector Calderón  Social Studies Facilitator (Academy)
Alfa  Assistant Principal (Academy)
Monica Rivera  Teatro El Puente Coordinator
John Fleming  Community Development Coordinator (94-96)
Ernesto Malavé  El Puente Bushwick Coordinator

Community Health and Environment (CHE):

Monti Aguirre  CHE Coordinator Fall 97- Spring 98
Delia Montalvo  Environment Coordinator Summer 96- Fall 97
Axel Miranda  CHE Assistant Coordinator
Jahaira Duarte  CHE Activists Member

Josh Thomases  Social Studies Facilitator (Academy)

Alexei Torres  Director, Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice
Arthur Kell  Organizer, New York Public Interest Research Group
Robert Ledogar  Consultant, CIET International
Introduction

I don’t know why these things have to be transmitted by word of mouth, he thought... He had only one explanation for this fact: things have to be transmitted this way because they were made up from the pure life, and this kind of life cannot be captured in pictures or words. Because people become fascinated with pictures and words, and wind up forgetting the Language of the World.
— Paulo Coelho, The Alchemist

This is a story about how a group of people in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, created an organization, El Puente, to improve the quality of life of community residents. El Puente was founded 15 years ago, and as an organization it has accumulated numerous experiences in its effort towards social change. Leaders inspire and engage members by telling stories about the community the and victories in which residents have been involved. These stories make up El Puente’s history and storytelling is the mechanism for capturing and transmitting its lessons.

This thesis focuses on El Puente’s environmental history for several reasons. The environment is my area of expertise and interest; this creates a bias in my characterization of the organization, both by stressing stories about the environment and because it makes me less critical than I would like to be. When I first heard about El Puente in 1992, it was in the context of their environmental work. The Toxic Avengers were well-known as a youth group housed at El Puente fighting for environmental justice in Williamsburg. Also, El Puente’s environmental activities have been the focus of their political organizing and so they present a rich trajectory of actions towards social change, beyond the development of individual members. The struggle against the Brooklyn Navy Yard incinerator, which brought together the Latino and Hasidic communities in Williamsburg in a common cause, placed El Puente in the political spotlight. As a youth development organization, however, El Puente’s roots are in culture and the arts.

This thesis is also a story of an exercise in participant observation. As a staff person at El Puente since 1995, I have participated in creating the organizational history which is now told through stories; as a researcher and collector of stories since late 1997, I am the principal narrator of most of the stories told here. In January 1998 I recorded when stories were told in meetings and gatherings, and interviewed participants asking them a question: "Tell me a story." This is a reflection on my role as an active intervenor in the development of an organization, as well as how participants in an organization learn to reflect on their actions.

The question that I address in this thesis is: how can an organization learn from its own history to inform its actions toward social change? In order for an organization to survive and achieve its goals, it has to develop and adapt to change while building power for
incisive actions. (Senge, 1990) If it does not develop, it cannot build power to cause change; if it does not maintain the capacity to adapt to change, it cannot respond to new circumstances and then loses power. El Puente strives to be a learning organization — an institution with a strong group identity and legitimacy as a political actor, with a flexible structure to reinterpret its situation and maintain its relevance in the community. Building a learning organization is no small challenge. In examining El Puente, I focus on two questions:

- What aspects of El Puente's culture allowed the organization to sustain a fluid organizing effort for 15 years?
- How can El Puente use its culture to maintain a fluid approach to institutionalization?

The main theme throughout the thesis is organizational learning; how El Puente, as a community-based organization working toward social change, uses storytelling to learn from its history. The oral culture provides space for multiple voices and multiple accounts of personal and organizational experience. (Portelli, 1991) Storytelling creates a group dynamic that is engaging and fluid. (Vansina, 1985) By proposing reflective storytelling, I intervened in the workings of El Puente to foment learning from, and critical reflection on the organization's history. The intervention that I conducted was a process of self-evaluation through telling stories — what I call reflective storytelling — that culminated in a collective storytelling session with El Puente's Interim Leadership Circle (ILC). Forss, Cracknell, and Samsøe (1994) argue that "people in the organization learn by getting involved in evaluation work themselves — and evaluation will thus be one of the major instruments of learning." (p.583) I set out to ask how a creative process of self-evaluation can help El Puente's leadership learn from the organization's history.

The intervention was unlike common evaluations because I created a methodology as I came to understand the organizational culture, rather than having pre-conceived indicators and a ready-made evaluation process. Both the observations and the intervention were informed by my prior experience with El Puente. This thesis thus recounts a process of observation and understanding the organization (described in Chapter Two), followed by a studied intervention (discussed and analyzed in Chapter Three). While my research took the form of an intervention, it was not one-sided. Current participants at El Puente have been looking at ways to evaluate the organization with a view towards institutionalization; my project was a result of their inquiries. Evaluation is not an easy activity to practice regularly; learning from evaluations is even more difficult. (Forss, Cracknell, and Samsøe, 1994) Reflective storytelling aims to routinize self-evaluation using the organizational culture. The results of the intervention were positive, although it was only a first step towards a regular practice of reflective storytelling.
After six weeks of field work, I spent a month consolidating some of the stories I heard and my observations about the ritual of storytelling. My initial aspiration was to compile a history of El Puente's environmental experience that would be representative of the internal efforts to educate and organize people as well as the external efforts to ameliorate the political situation of Latino residents in Williamsburg. However, this task would take much more time than I was giving to it, both in the process of collecting the stories, and in the art of presenting them. It was very difficult to separate the content of the stories from the interpretations people made, and those from my own reflections on the stories and the impact of storytelling.

This project is no longer an evaluation of El Puente's environmental program. It is an attempt at exploring how participants can learn to carry out self-evaluation through reflection. This is not a compilation of El Puente's history but a discussion of how to manage history by keeping it relevant to new volitions. It is not about changing the organizational culture to fit the model of a learning organization; it is about learning how to use the culture to learn how to learn, and in this way build power. Throughout my research, and previously as a staff person at El Puente, I was inspired by the stories that were told — both in regular rituals and also when I asked about them. This thesis is about those stories, and about the details that people remember, like the shade of green used in painting the "incinerator monster" and the light blue that made the basketball court in Berry Playground look like a big swimming pool. These details demonstrate the importance of creativity as a key component of successful actions, and that organizations are always balancing their long-term vision with the beauty of the moment.

"Great organizational histories, like novels, are written, not first by constructing interpretations of events and then filling in the details, but by first identifying the details and allowing the interpretations to emerge from them." (March, Sproull, and Tamuz, 1989, p.8) Those details are the most interesting part of this thesis. The stories included here try to capture the details that make El Puente unique and its history so rich. Some are direct transcripts from interviews and conversations, others are written from my memory of stories told to me, and many are narrated from my own experiences while working in the organization. These stories are not fully representative of El Puente's history. They are only a piece of the history which I selected to help me develop ideas about organizational learning and survival.

Telling stories is part of the functioning of an organization as it builds group identity, creates a common understanding of the struggle, celebrates victories, and articulates power. Documenting, and specifically writing stories down is a frustrating act. (Portelli, 1991) I feel that I cannot be true to the essence of the story: the environment in which they are told, the inflexions and accent marks,
the reactions of the audience as well as the simultaneous side conversations. In presenting them here in writing, the stories lose a large portion of their significance, which can only be sensed in the moment of hearing the story and observing the change in people as a result of storytelling. It is very difficult to capture the complexity and richness of oral history in writing (Portelli, 1991, Vansina, 1985); this has demonstrated more clearly to me how important storytelling is in capturing collective experiences. Thus this thesis has the inherent contradiction of arguing in favor of an oral culture in writing.

I have attempted to reconcile this contradiction by including stories about El Puente and by trying to maintain a narrative flow. Similarly to collective storytelling, where participants interrupt each other by adding details, I have tried to simulate a dialogue with the storytellers by interrupting my writing with excerpts of narration. In Chapter One, for example, the reader will find my description of El Puente's environmental activities is interrupted by Delia's contribution of her own experience. The hope is that this will enrich the text, in the same way that multiple voices enrich organizational history. Since this may be confusing for the reader I have tried to place markers in the format to indicate a different voice — a change from my analysis to my own recollections, and an addition of someone else's voice. When the text is indented, it points to a story. The narrator of the story is usually me, unless the text is single-spaced and preceded by someone's name.

The discussions about institutionalization point to a need both to consolidate multiple accounts into a more consistent organizational history and to document the history and its lessons. The challenge is finding a way to document or maintain the lessons of history while respecting the oral tradition, which proves successful in engaging people and transmitting information. In Chapter One, I outline the relevance of this topic in terms of my interest in social change and building organizations that can survive so as to carry it out. Organizational theorists contribute to this discussion by pointing out common characteristics that determine organizational survival, particularly organizational learning. I identify three important themes in survival: claiming legitimacy, maintaining relevance, and building a group identity. A brief background on El Puente is also included in this chapter to frame the analysis of organizational development with the case that I follow throughout the thesis. Chapter Two examines the role of history in organizational survival, and describes how El Puente manages its history through an oral culture of storytelling. I include examples of stories to understand some of the rituals and rules of storytelling that make it an effective practice in engaging actors by building group identity and claiming legitimacy. While storytelling plays an important role in mobilizing, the practice needs to be refined in order to achieve other goals of organizing: reflection and institution-building. Chapter Three describes my proposal for promoting organizational learning through reflective storytelling. By examining
examples of stories where narrators reflected on their experiences and changed through the process, I discuss the achievements of reflective storytelling. One of the outcomes was the realization that these experiences, and the organizational history itself, needs to be documented. I take this as evidence of change within the organization. The thesis therefore concludes with a reflection on the implications of documenting oral history and how it can be done in a way that can help El Puente learn and continue owning a living history — one that is reinterpreted, questioned, and re-told in a constant process of acting, changing, reflecting on the change, and acting again.

An essential component of my research was a collective storytelling session with El Puente's Interim Leadership Circle (ILC). For two hours, the twelve participants told stories and began to chart El Puente's environmental history, combing out significant events and reflecting on their impact on the organization and on Williamsburg. The session created a space for people to share with others how they experienced organizational activities. It also provided an opportunity to bring back memories of events that were forgotten or not part of the common folklore.

*Alfa:* Remember when we were planting things in the back? We had Ed-Ops [Educational Opportunities]... Do you remember those? The garden was an Ed-Op but it was before it was really developed as it is now, so we planted things in the back? That was the first time I planted anything that actually lived.

*Luis:* In the back of what?

*Frances:* In the back of the building.

*John:* You know, in pots, not through the cement.

*Luis:* Oh.

*Alfa:* You don't remember, and I was so proud. It was the first time that I actually had something that grew and lived longer than a month and not turn brown. And all these things really began to impact me in a spiritual way because then I began to relate this to our purpose and what does it mean to take care of the earth and how that's a spiritual duty of ours to do those types of things. And then I began to slowly but surely redefine what cultural literacy meant. Cultural literacy has always been defined in terms of ethnicity. But now I see it as a survival technique: How to live in your society, how to become empowered, and how to be committed to the community that you're in. And if we don't understand that kind of cultural literacy, then we're going to lose the war. Not even the battles, we're going to lose the war.

This interaction explains the essence of reflective storytelling. The first step is to recall an event that was significant in the organization's and/or the individual's development (*Remember when...?*). Then the teller shares why this story is significant to her (*I was so proud*). In explaining the significance of the event, the teller engages the listeners in reflecting on the meaning to the organization (*what cultural literacy meant*). Through the reflection there surfaces a larger symbol (*cultural literacy*) and a broader meaning (*if we don't understand... we'll lose the war*). This is one of many powerful examples of the outcomes of reflective storytelling.

---

Chapter One: Learning to Learn for Survival

By acting, reflecting, and interpreting, organizations learn what they are. By observing their own actions, they learn what they want. — James March, Lee Sproul, and Michal Tamuz, "Learning from Samples of One or Fewer"

Organizing collective actions for social change is a long-term process that requires organizations that will survive long enough to build action on top of action and engage people in seeking power to change their situations. Experience shows that few organizations outlive their actions and are able to see through long-term transformation. Organizational survival is therefore key to achieve social change. Community-based organizations (CBOs) are at the forefront of transformative action. They face numerous challenges in organizing and in ensuring organizational survival. The tension between creative action and the need to institutionalize forces many organizations to either disband or lose creativity. I ask whether those are the only two choices, and examine El Puente's effort to create a learning organization as a third alternative. This chapter sets up two particular questions to be explored in further chapters:

- How has El Puente survived for 15 years?
- What does the organization need to do to sustain its efforts in the future?

1.1 Organizational survival

Organizations that seek to build power for social change are involved in a constant process of organizing. Institution-building, therefore, is not a means to achieve a goal but rather an on-going process of solidifying power. Organizational survival is the achievement of an organization to maintain a group of people engaged in actions as well as maintaining the spirit and vision of those actions towards social change. Organizations must learn how to do this by balancing claims to legitimacy (building on past actions) and maintaining relevance (adapting to changing circumstances); the biggest challenge in this learning process is actually learning how to learn. Community-based organizations are grounded in a community and maintain close ties to its residents. In order to do this, CBOs must be able to articulate a group identity that reflects an understanding of relevant concerns and asserts the organization's legitimacy as a political actor.

Because circumstances are always changing, organizational practices must have the flexibility to adapt to change. The process of organizing includes a constant conversation between leaders and members so as to engage and re-affirm goals and tactics. But organizations must learn how to do this, and participants must increase their capacity to understand and reflect on events so as to adapt to change and plan further actions to cause more change. Organizational survival, then entails
organizations, and the people within them, learning how to observe current situations, reflect on them, and re-tell them in a way that incorporates previous experiences as a way of building legitimacy, maintaining relevance, and engaging participants by demonstrating a group identity.

1.1.1 The challenges of organizing
I will argue that community-based organizations (CBOs) involved in organizing for social change develop in similar ways. As they grow and engage larger groups of people, tensions emerge between maintaining an organizational structure and incorporating new participants, concerns, and multiple interpretations of present situations and future goals. There is therefore a constant tension between having a loose structure, which allows flexibility and creativity, and building an institution that will provide more credibility and stability, as well as more opportunities for learning. (Senge, 1990)

These tensions are caused by, and reflected in common characteristics of CBOs. High turn-over in staff creates difficulties in maintaining continuity in organizing or a sense of identity in the organization. Information is lost as staff leave; programs and interests change (often drastically) as new staff come in. These non-profit entities are mostly in low-income neighborhoods and have limited resources to implement their programs. Funding cuts and other limitations force CBOs to prioritize concerns, and often internal development and infrastructure are not seen as pressing.

CBOs must maintain public interest in their campaigns and inspire participation by their constituency. They therefore need to balance on-going work with emerging concerns. With new issues emerging every day, it is difficult both to decide which ones to focus on, while continuing to work on an "old" concern. This brings us to another characteristic often seen in CBOs: organizing often happens in crisis mode. There is usually little time to prepare actions, in spite of the foresight many CBOs profess to have. This means that the environment is highly dynamic and unpredictable.

All of these challenges mean that for CBOs to be effective in practice they must win short-term victories, sustaining a continuity between these victories that will lead to broader change. Organizations become repositories for victories in stories, and power for change is built with collective actions over time. Some of the barriers to continuity may be overcome through organizational functions, for example by maintaining an institutional memory that keeps track of how these obstacles have been dealt with in the past. This learning is implicit in organizations. Unfortunately, these challenges can mean that resources necessary for organizational learning are not available and it can be difficult to learn or overcome barriers.
1.1.2 Ad-hoc mobilizing and institution-building

Some organizations respond to these tensions by having a loose structure that allows them to constantly mobilize people, re-creating the organization with every campaign. This is known as ad-hoc mobilizing, where people come together around a particular issue, and when the issue is resolved the group disbands until a new concern comes up. These groups are a-historical; as they renew themselves with each campaign they rarely take with them past experiences. This often forces them to re-invent strategies and tactics, making them inefficient. It also diminishes their power and legitimacy as political actors which leads to a short life for the organization. Ad-hoc groups act on relevant concerns but do not maintain the legitimacy needed to build power for long-term social change.

Other organizations deal with the tension between the need for constant organizing and establishing an institution by creating rigid structures with set practices, rules and goals. They build on their legitimacy from past actions and routinize activities that are seen to meet people’s needs. While this allows an organization to grow and maintain on course, it often leads to bureaucratization which takes away the creativity necessary for organizing and inventing solutions. Traditional bureaucratic institutions rarely create spaces for new voices and interpretations of visions for the future. (Senge, 1990) In institutionalizing, CBOs run the risk of falling into organizational models like the social services or the community development corporations, which aim to ameliorate social and economic conditions, but in doing so they lose the focus on social change. Routinizing practices and developing into a service model moves CBOs away from organizing collective actions and diminishes the impact of their work. Institutions can claim legitimacy but they have trouble maintaining relevance in their work. It is also difficult to learn if an institution cannot adapt and change.

The process of institutionalization differentiates ad-hoc groups from organizations that build power to sustain collective action. Giddens (1975) affirms that structures enable human agency, and that structures are constituted through action. In order to build power through transformative collective action, therefore, there is a need to build structures that have continuity. A significant difference between an institution and an ad-hoc group is that institutions create the possibility of learning from

2 Examples of this type of groups include coalitions that come together around a specific campaign, like the Coalitions to Stop the Persian Gulf War, or around a specific issue, like welfare reform or immigrants’ rights. Once the issue has been resolved (or defeated) the group loses its purpose for existence.

3 Community Development Corporations were created to promote community-based planning and ownership but as they became institutionalized they turned more to tenant services than leading social change.
experience and of avoiding the problems associated with forming and disbanding with each campaign, particularly the loss of legitimacy and identity. At the same time, institutions create the possibility of routinizing experience. After 15 years of successful organizing, El Puente does not run the risk of being an ad-hoc group; rather the challenge is avoiding becoming a bureaucratic institution. The model of a learning organization provides an opportunity to avoid rigidity by creating systems where organizations can learn from their experience and allow themselves to be changed by their actions.

1.1.3 Learning Organizations

As El Puente strives to create an institution for social change, an important question that arises is whether there are only two options for organizations: either to remain spurring ad-hoc organizing — and eventually disappear — or to become traditional bureaucratic institutions — where the spirit of change disappears. If we are optimistic about the transformative results of collective action, we have to believe that there is a way to create long-term organizations with structures to build on while still being flexible so as to incorporate new ideas and adapt to changing circumstances and visions. The tension between becoming an established organization that is recognized by its actions and being open to change by inventing new approaches to action will always exist; the challenge is finding a balance between institution-building and constant action, or claiming legitimacy and maintaining relevance. This was my concern when I looked at El Puente and asked: how has this community-based organization survived and engaged in successful collective action for 15 years? And, what does it need to do in order to ensure its future survival?

In October 1997, Luis, the President of El Puente, told me that the organization strives to be a learning organization, following the model that Peter Senge (1990) sets out in The Fifth Discipline. Senge (1990) describes learning organizations where people practice "systems thinking", an understanding of the world in which they function, and their role in that world. Participants in learning organizations are constantly expanding their capacity to create the results they desire, they are encouraged to seek new patterns of thinking, and they work towards a collective vision within the context of an organization. This view of a learning organization may be a third model of organizational development that reconciles the need to build structures with the need to renew and revisit visions and strategies. Senge (1990) writes about the creative tension, which is "the force that comes into play at the moment when we acknowledge a vision that is at odds with current reality." (p.151) While an ad-hoc group addresses this tension by disbanding, and a traditional institution changes the vision to match reality, a learning organization works to change reality and re-articulate the vision. Argyris and Schön (1996) explain the ideal of learning organizations as having "organizational adaptability, flexibility..., readiness to rethink means and ends, inquiry-
orientation, realization of human potential for learning in the service of organizational purposes, and creation of organizational setting as contexts for human development." (p.180) This research therefore seeks to examine El Puente, its organizational culture, and whether it is developing as a learning organization.

A learning organization leads actions that are planned, executed, and evaluated. By reflecting on the process and results of the actions, organizations learn from their experience. March and Olsen (1994) write about learning in political and social terms. Their discussion highlights mechanisms for learning, particularly collective learning. An important factor that they emphasize is the transmission of lessons from primary learners to new participants through rules and accounts. This is particularly important in community-based organizations, where staff turn-over creates large gaps in learning. This is a process similar to institutionalization, where practices and visions are established through stories. Lindblom (1990) advances the practice of organizational inquiry to formulate new aspirations and to inform problem solving. He supports Senge's point that learning through inquiry requires the participation of people involved in the organization. Learning is optimized through interactions and collective visioning. Most importantly, people must learn how to conduct inquiries about their own experiences and volitions. Lindblom also maintains that organizations build power through honest inquiry that add information to conversations. Organizations may shy away from honest inquiry because it is difficult to engage in critical reflection. This is a challenge for El Puente: learning how to be critical of its actions so as to learn from them and inform subsequent actions.

March, Sproull, and Tamuz (1991) focus our discussion of organizational learning by posing the question of how organizations learn from their own history, given that "the paucity of historical events conspires against learning." (p.1) The authors argue that organizations accentuate limited experience by seeking multiple interpretations and lessons from singular events. "Organizations often augment history by attending to multiple observers and interpretations... [A]n organization's repertoire may lead to include several different, possibly contradictory, story lines... To be sure, efforts to make multiple interpretations consistent are also routine in organizations." (Ibid., p.3) This is an essential component in organizational development and a key concern of this thesis: how El Puente makes sense of its history through multiple accounts, and how it reconciles the accounts into a consistent story.

Institution-building is an on-going process of developing and learning, and not necessarily a step to become a rigid institution. The goal of becoming a learning organization, then, is to engage in a constant practice of inquiry and renewing interpretations of current circumstances and visions.
which change as a result of collective actions. But the inquiry process remains within an organizational framework that is able to retain knowledge, learn, and develop. Forss, Cracknell and Samset (1994) further emphasize that organizational learning "means changes in what the organization knows and how it acts." (p.575) Understanding that people are agents of change, the goal of my intervention at El Puente was to cause a similar change in how the organization views learning and how it can learn to learn.

Senge (1990) affirms that in a learning organization, "action will still be critical but incisive action will not be confused with incessant activity." (p.304) Incessant activity is often what ad-hoc groups engage in. Incisive action taken by learning organizations are planned, acted on, and evaluated; the evaluation brings closure to the action but also opens a link to a subsequent action. Incisive actions are part of a broad organizational strategy that goes beyond the tangible results of a single action and instead demonstrate a connection between actions. Learning organizations that organize incisive actions allow themselves to be changed as a result of the actions; this differentiates them from rigid institutions and is an important sign of learning. In articulating El Puente's goals, leaders say that they want to create "an institutionalized movement for change" — I interpret this to mean an institution that carries out incisive actions. Understanding El Puente's oral culture, I look at reflective storytelling as a component of incisive action, where significant events are captured and elaborated and re-told.

A significant result of reflection is an understanding of the connection between actions that an organization takes over time. History is important both to inform actions as well as to evaluate them as a component of an organizational trajectory towards a vision for social change. History informs actions as organizations learn from their own experience. March, Sproull and Tamuz (1991) assert that it is easier to learn from positive experiences (or from victories) than from negative experiences. El Puente learned several lessons about politics from its victory over the incinerator, which organizers used when strategizing about an approach to fighting a re-zoning initiative. When deciding on what to do about an up-coming hearing, John stated that "the only way we won before was through mobilizing people and organizing protests. We didn't win on the incinerator by sending a couple of people to public hearings." Organizers at El Puente, as in other institutions, are able to lean on previous experiences to both engage actors and inform strategies. The challenge in learning is how to capture lessons from previous experiences as a regular process of reflection and planning, and not simply a casual comment in a meeting.

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4 CHE Action Team planning session, August 1997.
1.1.4 Storytelling as a Learning Process

Although community-based organizations develop in similar ways, each organization is still unique in the culture they create to engage community residents, explore their interests, and organize actions. Institution-building is a process of refining an organizational culture and learning from past experience to organize more successfully. Many organizations, including El Puente, use storytelling in organizing. I will examine how storytelling can be used to learn from one's history. Leaders can tell stories that re-affirm the organization's legitimacy by linking history to current and relevant concerns. In the act of re-telling stories, other participants are directly involved in defining the identity of the group as a result of exchanges of experiences and interpretations. As these stories circle back to the organization, the learning process is solidified, as lessons are extracted from the stories to inform new actions.

Storytelling is the practice of managing history orally through rituals and symbols. (Vansina, 1985) Specific events, or images of an event, are captured as symbols that preserve experiences from which listeners can extract a significance that relates to their current circumstances. History is about change, similarly "a story describes a sequence of actions and experiences of a certain number of characters... These characters are represented in situations which change [to] which they react..." (Gallie quoted in Bruner, 1990, p.44) Symbols are organized thematically into stories. Themes are useful in the maintenance of memory and in the extraction of meaning from the stories; "without themes there would be no way to deal with events." (Ong, 1977, p.74) Oral historians like Ong look at themes like births, marriages, and other markers in a family or social group. In organizational development, we see themes like victories (over the incinerator, over street violence), new phases in the organization (the creation of the Academy, the opening of the garden), and the rituals that give continuity to the organization (Three Kings Day).

Stories are shared and transmitted through rituals and performances. (Vansina, 1985) At El Puente, telling stories at the beginning of a meeting provides continuity to actions and creates a sense of a continuous conversation that takes place through actions. Rituals are important because they link the stories to present concerns, thereby maintaining the relevance of the symbol in newer experiences. Rituals also serve to create a setting for storytelling as well as markers for remembering stories. Vansina (1985) explains the importance of rituals in creating settings for the retention of organizational memory: "Under suitable circumstances... anecdotes, quite similar to historical gossip, crop up, often in a stable form. They are hard to recall on demand but in a proper setting the cue recalling them is triggered and they are told." (p.18)
Experiences gain meaning after the event takes place and participants reflect on its impact. (Kaplan in Fischer and Forester, 1993) Much of the reflection happens through storytelling. In the reflection, people can choose which are the significant events (Ong, 1977); this makes participatory storytelling essential as it is then that the selection of events takes place. Explaining the role of storytelling in defining history and awarding significance to events, Euben (1997) cites Hannah Arendt as writing that, "no remembrance remains secure unless it is condensed and distilled into a framework of conceptual notions, within which it can further exercise itself. Experience and even stories... sink back into the futility inherent in the living words and the living deed unless they are talked about over and over again." (p.64) P.S. 16 is an important story because Latino residents in Williamsburg view it as their victory where they were instrumental in reclaiming the school; ten years later they ensure the survival of the experience by linking it to the present and revisiting the story whenever they organize other actions.

El Puente has been developing an oral culture as an important component of the organization. In order to become a learning organization, El Puente needs to learn how to use this culture to develop a community of learners. Part of this entails training storytellers as well as learning how to listen. Learning through storytelling also means understanding how the culture works and how managing history can affirm legitimacy and relevance as well as build group identity. The question then becomes how to mentor participants so that they become storytellers who can use their skills to learn from the community's experience and organize successful actions for social change.

1.2 El Puente at 15

1.2.1 Background
El Puente is a youth development organization based in the Southside of Williamsburg, in Brooklyn, New York. Founded in 1982, El Puente has tackled many diverse issues that affect the quality of life of Latino young people in Williamsburg: from street violence to health and environment. According to the founders, the primary goal of the organization is to promote a holistic development of young people through the arts, education, and community development. In defending the health and safety of Williamsburg's residents, El Puente has become well-known for its environmental activities, which focused on defeating a proposed incinerator in the community by organizing an alliance with the Hasidic community in the neighborhood.⁵ Since the

⁵ While the media portrayed the Community Alliance For the Environment (CAFE) as a coalition between Latinos and Hasidic Jews in Williamsburg, the group actually included Williamsburg's Polish residents as well as the African-American community in Fort Greene. For more details, see Shaw, 1996.
victory over the incinerator, the environmental program has expanded to include open space and community gardening, environmental education, and community-based environmental epidemiology.

Delia:6 But I have to say that all of this started with the Toxic Avengers... And it was really the young people that started... Then came the environmental justice team, the work that we did, WEPA [Williamsburg Environmental Preservation Activists], the Outreachers, and now I hear CHE [Community Health and Environment]. It's important that the young people still get that. How important it is that they have a say in what is going on in their community and also that they know about what is going on. I think that when I grew up here, I didn't know anything that was going on. It was Toxic Avengers that taught me: did you know Radian was here, all these years? And I was like, WHAT? Are you kidding? So that's why it's important for them to be doing this work and making sure that communities like this are not going to stay quiet.

El Puente's core of organizers are young people who are students in the Academy for Peace and Justice or members of the after-school program. They set up groups, like the current CHE Activists and YO! (Youth Organizers), young people are trained on issues and organizing, and take on projects that link community organizing with a specific concern.

Delia: I think one of my first experiences dealing with environment here at El Puente was with the Toxic Avengers. I remember them having a little display down in the main area, and they were talking about Radian and Van Man. ... They had a couple of parties and workshops to bring young people to participate and maybe join the Toxic Avengers and also to go out and educate. ...One of their main focuses was ...to rid Radian from the community. So I figured why not have another group. ...We started off with basic education, them finding out what kind of environmental things they could do. One of the things they learned about was about Radian, also about the incinerator they wanted to build. They talked about pollution prevention and lead. Then from there they looked at recycling, and recycling being a possibility, and how would recycling better the community and the world as a whole. ...Then the next project became the garden. You know, the empty lot on South Second street; the site was horrible, we would clean up during the summer but it wasn't quick enough for us to plant anything there so by the time the summer was over here we cleaned it up, but then during the whole year when we couldn't work in there it was being dumped on again. So that went on for a couple of years. But in between Earth Spirit continued doing work on recycling, then they started learning more about lead and speaking about lead.

All during that time there was the struggle against the incinerator. And once again that was the Toxic Avengers and Benny was one of the people who pushed us to join forces with the Hasidic community. And up until then we were always at odds because of the housing situation. ... And here was an environmental issue but I think a lot of stuff was prevented because once again of El Puente's reputation. And people knew that El Puente was working with [the United Jewish Organizations] and so UJO was down with El Puente then okay, both sides were

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pretty much at peace. Not that there weren't a couple of times where I wasn't concerned that [riots may break out]. But the whole thing with the incinerator, CAFE came about, which brought all these different people that I never saw here before, coming to El Puente.

1.2.2 Challenges

El Puente faces many of the organizational challenges outlined in the previous section. Between 1996 and 1997, the environmental program had three different coordinators. As each coordinator took over the program, the name changed from Community Development Team, to Environment Team, and now Community Health and Environment (CHE) Team. Because there is no common filing or archival system, documentation was lost as previous staff left (as well as information that was never documented). While some activities carry over from one team to the next, it is often the case that the program re-invents itself each time. Staff turn-over present numerous challenges in learning, particularly as new staff must learn to learn from previous experiences where they were not personally involved. The staff turn-over and the new programs are nonetheless couched in a broader structure that El Puente provides, and so it is not a complete renewal of efforts without continuity from previous efforts. The focus of this thesis is to examine how El Puente gives continuity between seeming separate programs as it tries to build a movement for social change. Organizational learning becomes important as a way of resolving difficulties in personal learning.

Other organizational challenges also exist, particularly the lack of resources that force El Puente to focus on program work, which brings in funding, while neglecting infrastructure for which few funders give resources. Staff members are generally overwhelmed with responsibilities towards the projects they are funded for and must still take on tasks that receive no funding, particularly administrative functions. With many pressing concerns in the community, from the re-zoning initiative to restructuring Eastern District High School, issues and battles are often prioritized by their urgency — if there is sandblasting happening on the Williamsburg Bridge the organization will focus there to stop it immediately. This is the crisis mobilizing that I described earlier. Luis justifies this by saying that El Puente takes advantage of these incidents to move forward a broader vision and organize a long-term movement.

In addition to organizational challenges, El Puente — as a CBO based in Williamsburg — faces daunting environmental problems. Williamsburg is said to be "the most toxic community in New York City."7 Luis summarizes the many environmental problems: "the nuclear waste storage plant in front of an elementary school [Radic], the largest bus terminal in Brooklyn, an underground oil

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7 Interview with Monti Aguirre, 17 October, 1997.
spill larger than the Exxon Valdez, the BQE [Brooklyn Queens Expressway], 37 waste transfer stations, etc. etc."
Organizing against environmental threats in Williamsburg poses two problems. The first is prioritizing, the numerous threats are overwhelming and it is difficult to decide which to tackle. The second problem is technical. Environmental threats are difficult to understand, particularly the health effects of certain facilities. There are no studies that explain cumulative health risks of multiple exposures in the same neighborhood. This makes environmental problems more difficult to mobilize around, and organizers often fall into speaking to people's fears of toxicity and poisoning rather than their imagination for a healthier community.

1.2.3 Current restructuring
Ten years after its founding, El Puente took an important step towards institutionalization by opening the Academy for Peace and Justice in 1993. This was an important accomplishment for the organization, as it launched El Puente's day-long program and doubled the membership. The Academy has also strengthened El Puente's position and recognition in the community. Now, at 15, El Puente is looking at working with adults and consolidating the different programs (arts, education, environment, health, and community development) into an integrated strategy for social change. El Puente is working on opening a larger center which will include the school, an adult education center, and a community-based clinic to fight environmental health problems. The CHE Action Team is planning to consolidate its environmental education, action, and health activities in the clinic which will promote a public health approach to health services by engaging residents in determining a community health agenda through a community epidemiology effort. Sonia said of El Puente that "at 15 we're adolescents. This is the moment when you take your values and you begin to figure out which ones you'll keep and what you will throw out from your own experience. You're still exploring but you have knowledge and experience to learn from." The current challenge, then, is learning how to learn from the experience El Puente has accumulated.

When an organization moves towards institutionalization, the challenge becomes doing so without losing creative force and flexibility to reinterpret present circumstances and visions for the future. (Forss, Cracknell, and Samset, 1994) The objective is to become a learning organization and avoid becoming too bureaucratic. For example, the drive to open a community-based clinic to provide primary health care for families can easily lead El Puente towards a social service model. But if the clinic functions with a public health and community-based epidemiology model that fosters community involvement in determining health care priorities, then El Puente may be able to

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8 The El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice is a public high school certified by the New York Board of Education as part of their New Visions Schools. The Academy currently houses 120 students in grades 9-12 and functions with an alternative curriculum, tying learning to community concerns.
9 Sonia Bu in 16 October, 1997 meeting.
maintain a fluid structure that organizes residents around a common health agenda, thereby changing the current state of health care and promoting a healthier community. El Puente is moving away from ad-hoc mobilizing but leaders hope to maintain the creativity and imagination that comes from engaging people in new projects and in new ways by remaining true to their roots in cultural work.

1.3 El Puente's group identity

Many of these questions about organizations deal with a group's identity: how members identify themselves as part of the group, and how it is seen and recognized by others — articulating what El Puente is about. Senge (1990) argues that the key to build learning organizations is how people see themselves and their relationship with the organization and with the world, and how this view changes through action, reflection, and interaction. The author writes that two important disciplines in a learning organization are personal mastery and team learning. Achieving mastery in leadership and organizing entails learning how to learn: observing situations, listening to people's concerns, reflect on and make sense of this, and articulate action plans that address circumstances and concerns. Leaders do not surface but are mentored in the organizational culture that provides tools for learning. As actions are organized collectively, team learning is also an important component in building an organization. Through team learning an organization and its members collectively create and articulate their identity. Ad-hoc groups do not necessarily have a strong identity; they lose effectiveness when they re-invent themselves instead of building on past actions. Traditional institutions have a strong identity, their practices are routinized and people know what the organization does. But a rigid identity inhibits new members and thwarts creative problem-solving, because there is an established, and often bureaucratic, way of doing things. Interpretations of El Puente's identity fluctuate between discontinuity (similar to an ad-hoc group) and rigidity. The balance between the two gives El Puente the flexibility to develop new programs that build on past actions but do not necessarily emulate them. In October 1997, Luis said that "as much as I believe in history as an important tool for learning, I also believe in principles and experience. Learning is in the action, it is struggle that informs learning."

1.3.1 Identity is discontinuous

When characterizing El Puente's activities, it is easy to simply enumerate the different groups that have taken on environmental activities, from the Toxic Avengers to CHE. Each group had different staff members, different young people, different issue work, and superficially there is little continuity between the groups. Participants in each group do not always think about how
their actions fit into a larger organizational picture. Young CHE Activists know about the Toxic Avengers but do not identify with them. Luis expressed concern about the CHE Activists: "they really don't know their legacy. They don't know the history, the tradition that allowed them to come into being."\textsuperscript{10} Staff also have trouble articulating the impact that their actions have on the whole organization. They are not accustomed to telling a story about their activities that creates linkages with other actions, and so accounts seem isolated and disconnected, taking away the power that an action can take.

\textit{Analia}: What about your eco-action class?
\textit{Joe}: Oh, that wasn't a big deal. It was just this class I taught with the idea of doing long-term training in physical fitness and outdoors things to do field trips and with outward bound.
\textit{Analia}: But you also did environmental awareness, right?
\textit{Joe}: Yeah, a little. Some recycling and whatnot.\textsuperscript{11}

While I had viewed Joe's eco-action class as a first attempt at integrating environmental concerns into the Academy, he saw it as an isolated event. Joe understood that the class had affected the students enrolled in it, but he had not thought about the connection between his class and other efforts at involving students in community issues. This characterization of El Puente's identity sounds like an ad-hoc group: people doing diverse activities that are not necessarily tied together. At a first glance, then, organizing seems discontinuous: not a series of actions that build upon each other but rather activities that have a short-term impact on the participants.

As I set out to explore El Puente's history in environmental organizing, I looked for markers that could shed some light on the seemingly disparate activities. It occurred to me that maybe by asking participants to define certain El Puente household terms, like the "12 Principles"\textsuperscript{12} and the "El Puente way," then I could arrive at some articulation of group identity. But people I spoke with resisted the framing of their experiences in this manner. People know they participate in an organization called El Puente, that it has 12 Principles to which they ascribe, and that there are certain approaches to organizing that are called the "El Puente way." But they have enough flexibility and freedom to invent their own activities and approaches; they are not conscious of being influenced by the larger organization and so do not articulate their goals and strategies within that framework. For example, YO! are charged with studying and developing strategies for economic development. Through their leadership development, the young organizers have explored different approaches to organizing and to community development; they view their.

\textsuperscript{10} ILC interview, 27 January, 1998.
\textsuperscript{11} Interview with Joe Matunis, 17 January, 1998.
\textsuperscript{12} El Puente's 12 Principles are: \textbf{Holism, Development, Creating Community, Collective Self-Help, Mentoring, Love and Caring, Safety, Creativity, Mastery, Respect, Unity Through Diversity, Peace and Justice.}
strategies as specific to YO! and not necessarily coming from El Puente, even though the framework within which they organize is created by El Puente. My inquiry about the 12 Principles taught me that I could not expect to run a successful evaluation with my own indicators — "how people articulate their actions as achieving, or getting closer to the principles" — but instead had to explore how participants learn to set up markers that can help them reflect on their own actions.

1.3.2 identity is consistent
To characterize El Puente as discontinuous is too simple an explanation of the organization's identity. El Puente may look like an ad-hoc group from some perspectives but it is also an organization that has been organizing in Williamsburg for 15 years. The organization does not die and re-create itself each time a group graduates and a new one is formed. All of the groups are part of El Puente, but they do not make up El Puente. Community residents and others involved in actions (allies and targets) identify the different groups with El Puente and the organization's reputation. This is similar to the way Parfit (1991) has explained the ability to maintain a consistent identity through seeming discontinuity by stating that "I am the same person as myself twenty years ago, though I am not now strongly connected to myself then." (p.206) Both the CHE Activists and the Toxic Avengers are part of El Puente, even though CHE Activists do not feel a strong connection to the group that came ten years before them.

A large part of the identity does not come from El Puente's members but rather from community residents who identify with the organization as being community-based. While working with young people means that there is a constant turn-over in participants, being based in a community — listening to and understanding community concerns — grounds El Puente and formalizes its identity as an organization that is involved in a consistent trajectory of actions to improve the quality of life of residents. The role that young members play in renewing El Puente's identity combined with the residents' role in maintaining a consistent identity allow the organization to balance its legitimacy (how El Puente is viewed by residents as a CBO) and its relevance (members deciding what they want to work on that is of current concern in Williamsburg).

This broader organizational identity has allowed El Puente to sustain its organizing efforts throughout the last 15 years. While this identity is not always explicit, when participants reflect on their experiences and listen to others' experiences, they connect these stories into a larger organizational history. Seemingly disparate activities are part of a larger organizational effort that is made clearer when participants reflect on these actions and their connection to each other.
At the Interim Leadership Circle (ILC) session, for example, a number of stories were told about the summer 1992. At first they seemed to describe separate events that El Puente organized. As the stories were elaborated, however, it became clear that these activities had established the context for the march across the bridge that took place in January 1993. This march was an important event in the struggle against the incinerator and in the development of El Puente's environmental movement.

*Frances*: It was simultaneous to the focus we started to have in terms of our summer program, in terms of being on the street. When we started having four or five block fiestas and we had them all over. We had them at Taylor Wythe, in the Southside, Bushwick, and we would finish at [Washington] Plaza. But it was really

*Luis*: What Year was that? ...

*Ernesto*: ...that was in 1992. I was telling John that our first street festival [in Bushwick] was indoors because it rained that day. And we had to bring the street down into the auditorium and do it there. ...

*Joe*: We had a bunch of street festivals that summer. I remember doing one, pretty much by myself and I remember being a nervous wreck. And I talked to [Frances] about it and [she] said, go ahead and just do it. But I didn't know how to organize anything.

*Frances*: You can do it Joe!

*Joe*: And a bunch of little kids showed up and we made masks and we had drums and we marched across the bridge, with these animal masks and it looked so silly.

*Frances*: Oh I remember, it was so silly but they loved it!

*Luis*: So that was our first march across the Williamsburg Bridge, right?

*Joe*: Yeah, we were practicing.

*Luis*: So when was that?

*Joe*: That must have been summer 92, because there was a bunch of stuff happening at the same time.

*Luis*: Put that down, summer 92, that's interesting: First march over the bridge.

*Joe*: I think I met Katie at one of these recycling things.

*Monica*: RAW?

*Joe*: Right, RAW, and she was interested in working with El Puente in the Southside. I think she had some group on the Northside or something. They were doing a parade and they wanted to come to our parade. So you had all these white kids from the Northside with animal masks come marching down to the Southside.

*Monica*: I vaguely remember that.

*Luis*: A Williamsburg environmental march, and it totally escapes our memory!

While Frances linked the summer activities to a new phase of El Puente being out on the streets, and Joe and Luis joked about the parade with the kids being the first march across the bridge, it was Alexei who reflected on the summer organizing efforts as directly related to the preparations for the famous march.

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Alexei: I remember that the summer before, we tried to do a lot of work in reaching out and building bridges in preparation for this march. We did a whole bunch of street festivals. It was interesting, we did all these street festivals ... and we purposely invited the Hasidic community and we did them in Hasidic neighborhoods to try to bring out, build relationships with Hasidic young people. And I remember going and the Hasidic children were not allowed to come in into the fence, so they'd be watching through the fence all the face painting and activities going on and they'd want to come in but they were allowed to cross the fence. So that particular work that summer... helped us to build some bridges but obviously there were still tensions.

This example also demonstrates the role that storytelling can play in evaluating actions and assessing why certain actions, such as this march, were so successful. The standard story of the march in 1993 rarely begins with the festivals that took place during the previous summer. By reflecting on the actions that preceded the march, participants can understand that marches don't just happen but come out of a larger organizing effort. Part of this effort in evaluation is identifying what factors ensured the success of the action. Arthur Kell of the New York Public Interest Research Group also described the events leading to the march, adding a reflection on the tensions in the coalition that forced the postponement of the action.

Arthur: I remember, obviously, that there was a lot of El Puente organizing that happened in the summer of 1992. And the march across the bridge was probably in November 92. That was a very hot time, that was probably the peak of it right around then. I remember we were in court, CAFE was suing... [the City] to follow the Federal Clean Air Act. The whole process of trying to develop a community-wide coalition while there was on-going friction over housing was extremely difficult. One time we were about to have a rally, wait, this was the march over the Williamsburg Bridge which was supposed to happen in November which was much closer to a decision-making point for part of the permits. The march was timed so that pressure would be applied as a decision was being formulated, probably by the Governor. But then...there was a housing crisis in which I think someone took over one of the buildings, a huge dispute over housing. CAFE just could not operate... So a whole lot of planning just stopped and the strategic moment passed. I don't think the march happened until January. Unbelievably it was in the middle of winter and still we had a huge turn-out and it was very successful.

Arthur's analysis highlights the strategic timing of the march that was planned to coincide with a law-suit and the legislative session. Similar to Alexei's account, it is also an evaluation of the action, though not so much its success but rather the obstacles that had to be overcome. An important component of reflection is understanding obstacles, how they were addressed, and how they could have been avoided.

1.4 Research Question

This thesis focuses on two questions. The first is: What aspects of El Puente's culture allowed the organization to sustain a fluid organizing effort for 15 years? The second question is: how can El Puente use its culture to maintain a fluid approach to institutionalization? At the heart of these questions is how El Puente is becoming a learning organization; finding the balance between institution-building and renewing strategies and goals while adapting to change. El Puente seems to be striking a balance in the tension and is at a critical point in determining how to institutionalize. A key factor in a learning organization is vocalizing a group identity, both as a way of engaging participants and maintaining relevance as well as to claim legitimacy and build power through a trajectory of actions and victories. The challenge in becoming a learning organization is building the participants' capacity to articulate a group identity as well as to identify with its components.

How an organization manages its history of collective action is a way of understanding how it builds a group identity and power to organize more effectively and bring the organization closer to its goals. Reaching one's goals is a useful way of understanding organizational learning. Senge (1990) states that "'learning ... does not mean acquiring more information, but expanding the ability to produce the results we truly want in life." (p.142) This thesis will therefore focus on how an organization learns from its history to articulate group identity, build power, and establish itself as an institution. Managing organizational history is going through the process that Sonia identified of choosing values and practices, thereby reaffirming an organizational culture which is to be institutionalized. The following chapter will explore the roles of history in organizational development, and describe El Puente's approach to managing history through storytelling, so that we can understand how El Puente has survived as a CBO for 15 years. A later chapter will develop the question of institutionalization and how reflective storytelling can help El Puente learn from its history while maintaining and reaffirming its organizational culture.
Chapter Two: History, Stories, and Storytelling

History is about liberation and freedom. For liberation is a precondition for power, power for memorable action, and action is the substance of history.
— Peter Euben, Corrupting Youth

2.1 The role of history in organizational development

My concern when I started this project was to explore how El Puente, as a community-based organization facing the many challenges outlined earlier (both organizationally and specifically in the environment field), has been able to sustain its successful organizing effort for the past 15 years. My initial interest in evaluating El Puente’s environmental effort led me to focus on the role of history in organizational development, specifically in how such an organization builds and maintains power, and learns from its experiences.

Because of the tie between history and organizational development introduced at the end of Chapter One, I conducted a series of interviews to gauge how El Puente manages its history. I began with traditional, and often rigid definitions of history as documented in archives and inscribed in the memories of participants as facts and time-lines. I was met with resistance from participants, and found few documents on which to base my historical analysis. When I began instead to look at how people use history, I found that people remember, reflect on, and transmit history by telling stories, rather than through formal and intentional documentation. These stories capture significant events in El Puente’s history, and through the ritual of storytelling meanings and significance of El Puente’s efforts are elaborated. Leaders at El Puente nurture a culture of storytelling and participants learn to make sense of their experiences and transmit lessons through stories that they hear and re-tell.

In this chapter I review the importance of understanding organizational history for building power and developing a learning organization. To move from ad-hoc mobilizing to institutionalization, an organization must demonstrate legitimacy and engage actors in relevant collective actions by having leaders who can articulate a group identity that speaks to people’s interests. While history plays a key role in creating institutions, how an organization manages and makes sense of its history is equally important in determining what type of institution is built. Collective or multiple accounts can facilitate learning, while singular and definitive accounts can lead to bureaucratization.

El Puente manages its history primarily through oral storytelling. I contrast the roles of history in organizational development with specific attributes of oral history, highlighting examples where El Puente creates legitimacy, builds group identity, and maintains a sense of purpose through stories. In the following chapter I will explore how history can promote organizational learning, some of
the challenges to learning presented by the oral tradition, and how reflective storytelling can address some of these challenges.

In Chapter One, I outlined some of the main points of the theory on organizational learning. This literature, which focuses on management and firms, provides insight into how organizations make use of, and learn from their history. (Senge 1990, March and Olsen 1994, March et. al. 1991) Organizational development is an active process, similar to that of organizing. "Institutional theorists... point out that institutionalized practices are not built in a day but, rather, through a gradual process of institutionalization." (Nohria and Gulati, 1994, p.540)

While theories on organizational learning provide a framework for understanding the role of history in institution-building, they are not sufficient to understand the role of history in building power. Euben (1997) makes the linkages between history, power and liberation. Political actors and organizations claim legitimacy by telling stories about their involvement in the creation of history. Euben (1997) illustrates this by discussing how historical accounts differ according to who is telling the story and what group of people they want to legitimate. As these stories are repeated and incorporated into a collective memory, they serve to build a group identity through a shared history. Nyberg (1981) discusses the mechanisms of building power by engaging people in storytelling about their history and interests. An important argument that he makes is the key role that good storytellers play in galvanizing group identity. Master storytellers are developed, and an organization that depends on them to organize must provide mentoring and capacity-building for storytellers. Lindblom (1990) elaborates on the idea of building power through engagement by tying these interactions to action in order to create change. This loop created by incisive actions permits CBOs to organize relevant actions that are informed by and linked to previous actions. If CBOs can involve participants in a reflection and inquiry process, participants take ownership of their history and of their actions, creating a stronger sense of group identity.

In order to understand how El Puente makes sense its history, I consulted authors of oral history. Ong (1977) and Vansina (1985) discuss the role of storytelling in the development of cultures. Vansina (1985) describes the rituals and rules involved in maintaining an oral tradition, and the challenges that oral cultures face in retaining stories. Ong (1977) writes about managing history, contrasting the spoken word with written text. Both are helpful in defining how history is managed in general, and then particularly in an oral culture. Portelli (1991) analyzes testimony from popular towns in Italy and the United States. His framing of the stories he recorded, as well as his reflection on his own role as an oral historian provide insight into how to approach an analysis of storytelling, particularly explicit sessions.
By taking the literature on firms and that on history and storytelling, it can be understood how a community-based organization like El Puente manages its history and aims to learn from it. As Senge (1990) explains, organizing and reflection are about change and liberation, understanding and learning from one's own history allows us to change. "Learning to see the structures within which we operate begins a process of freeing ourselves from previously unseen forces and ultimately mastering the ability to work with them and change them." (Ibid., p.94) This is how I understand "making sense" of history.

2.2 How El Puente manages its history

2.2.1 The ritual of storytelling
El Puente manages its history through an oral culture. Storytelling takes place with certain rituals and with certain rules. (Vansina, 1985) One of the most common rituals at El Puente are regular staff gatherings, which are less formal than meetings and without a set agenda. An example of the ritual of storytelling is demonstrated by a story about a famous march across the Williamsburg Bridge that was organized to protest the proposed building of the incinerator. The story is told in 1998 about a staff gathering I attended in 1996, where we heard about the march that took place in 1993.

The march across the bridge
I remember a staff meeting in 1996 where people from the three organizations identified with El Puente (El Puente de Williamsburg, El Puente Bushwick, and Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice in Soundview) came together to share a meal and get to know each other. As the different directors were introduced, we heard a story about Alexei Torres, the Founder and Director of Youth Ministries. When she was working in Williamsburg she was given a daunting task: to organize a march across the Williamsburg Bridge with the Hasidim and other members of the Community Alliance for the Environment (CAFE) to protest the proposed building of a 55-story garbage-burning incinerator in the Brooklyn Navy Yard.

The march had been planned for November 1992 but tensions in the community around housing issues forced the organizers to push the date until January 1993. On the other side of the bridge, the marchers were to be met by the Lower East Side Committee for a Healthy Environment; and the joke was that the march brought
together CAFE con LECHÉ. We were moved as Alexei (in 1996) told how insane it all seemed at the time for 1,200 people to be walking in the snow, holding candles, blocking traffic, against all odds. She described the desperation in defining a date (it ended up marking Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday) and in mobilizing people. In my mind, I saw pictures of Hasidic Jews walking side by side with Latinos, with Luis and Rabbi Niederman heading the procession, and I thought about the power of community-building. The march in 1993 signified the height of the campaign against the incinerator. The staff meeting in 1996 marked the victory over the incinerator as Governor Pataki signed a law condemning the project forever.

The staff gathering as a ritual creates a space for telling and re-telling stories. The act of telling the story of the march across the bridge, which everyone has heard repeatedly,16 serves to state El Puente’s legitimacy as a voice for Williamsburg’s Latino residents. El Puente as an organization provided a structure to mediate with Hasidic residents and to organize joint actions, solidifying its identity as an organization that builds bridges within the Latino community as well as with other communities.

The ritual of telling stories in gatherings helps in the coaching of new storytellers, as everyone must speak and also listen. The gatherings are informal settings where different people tell stories about their participation in El Puente without the stress of being in a meeting to plan or organize and action. By joining old and new participants this ritual helps people who were not directly involved in an action develop an understanding of the implications of the action so that they can then re-tell the stories they have heard. The gatherings can be seen as practice sessions for new storytellers, as they listen to stories and try out their own before they have to do it in public.

By telling this story in 1998, and documenting it here, I am contributing to the management of the organizational history. The story attempts to preserve the symbols of the march across the bridge in 1993—café con leche, a candlelight vigil in the snow, Hasidic and Latino residents walking together. By linking it to the staff meeting in 1996 I am articulating the organizational trajectory that narrates the defeat of the incinerator through collective action and El Puente’s survival beyond the campaign. This bridge between events, which galvanizes group identity, is what I prodded participants to articulate through reflective storytelling.

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16 When I was interviewing Josh (26 January, 1998) he said, “these are stories that I’ve been told that you’ve also heard many times...”
2.2.2 Preliminary research

In October 1997, I conducted a series of preliminary interviews with staff members in the environmental program to determine what role history played in strategic planning, and how much information about El Puente's environmental program they had access to. If the organization draws its legitimacy from past actions and maintains a group identity by tying those actions to relevant actions, then history must play an important role in planning and other daily activities. I looked to El Puente and asked how they have survived and developed in the last 15 years into a respected community institution in Williamsburg. Specifically I asked: How does El Puente manage its history? The challenge that I faced was how to find the answer to this question.

Just as "[b]usiness[es]... increasingly see what [they are] doing as 'managing history' (or more precisely as managing the history of the enterprise as it unfolds) as opposed to solving a series of technical problems..." (Piore, 1996, p.751) what differentiates a community-based organization from an ad-hoc group organized to solve a specific issue is an ability to manage their history. When I ask how El Puente manages its history, I look at how it understands its history and how it interprets its significance to inform the present. Managing history also entails transmitting experiences to new members, and retaining experiences in the collective or organizational memory. With traditional views of history and organizational structures, I sought to answer those questions by asking new staff what they knew about El Puente's history and by looking at in-house archives and external documents. I found that with these parameters, El Puente does not manage its history particularly well. I also found, however, that the formal view of how history is maintained does not take into account the organization's culture, and while documenting is not El Puente's strong point, maybe there are other ways of creating a collective history. This led me to explore a different methodology for approaching an analysis of organizational development that was more in tune with the prevailing organizational culture.

Can participants articulate an organizational history?

When I started to interview staff members in the environmental program, I wanted to know how much they knew about El Puente's history, whether they could tell me a story of how El Puente got to where it is now, and whether they learned any lessons from this history. I was trying to gauge organizational learning by capturing how current staff made sense of the history. Of course, a lot of my questions sounded like, "what happened next?" As if the results of my questions were going to lead me to a time-line of sorts. In separate interviews, I got answers as contradictory as one person saying that the height of environmental activity was between 1991 and 92, and another person saying that the environmental program did not even begin until 1993 or 94. I learned two important lessons from this process. The first is that I would not be able to understand whether
history played a role in strategic planning with the frame I created; if history plays a role, it is a subtle one and often unarticulated, and even if it doesn't the answer would invariably be yes.

The second lesson is that in order to understand the meaning of organizational history I had to step out of the chronological time-line and examine the significance of history in building power: achieving victories and furthering organizational development. Later in my research I made an attempt to explore what a time-line\textsuperscript{17} would look like and again saw the danger of leaning on events that are dated and can be marked on a calendar. During the storytelling session with the Interim Leadership Circle (ILC), we placed events — such as marches, meetings, and festivals — on a time-line, but we did not get to less tangible actions like creating a curriculum on Science for Community Action and training young people on community epidemiology. The result was that the time-line was loaded in 1992 and 1995 was looking pretty lonely. John reacted to this, "It's interesting to look at the time-line and how all the cards fall around 1992. The bulk of the action happened between 1991 and 1993." Hector objected to this statement, saying that it may be true for the environment, but for education the cards would be heavier later. This statement pointed to a larger organizational history not being reflected in the discussion. This type of time-line would not be very helpful in understanding the organizational history.

Another barrier presented by a time-line is the obligation it presents to date events (or symbols) that may have different significance and dates for participants, such as the "garden opening" which appeared in the time-line in 1991, 1995, and again in 1996. This point will be discussed later with respect to the fluidity of storytelling in assimilating conflicting memories. While a time-line is a useful visual tool for understanding a trajectory, it emphasizes events that can be dated and not long-term actions or trends. Senge (1990) warns that this type of fixation on events can "distract us from seeing longer-term patterns of change that lie behind the events and from understanding the causes of those patterns. ... If we focus on events, the best we can ever do is predict an event before it happens so that we can react optimally. But we cannot learn to create." (p.22) The goal of a learning organization (and of actions for social change) is to create new models and realities, not simply react to or fix recurrent issues. The latter is what I often refer to as the social service model. Still, in order to claim legitimacy both as an organization and as a participant in the organization, it is important to be able to cite important victories, like P.S. 16, the incinerator, etc. The question, then, is how can El Puente transmit its experience so that participants can claim them as their own.

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\textsuperscript{17} See Appendix 1: An attempt at a time-line.
In-house documents and archives
El Puente does not have a clear system of filing reports and maintaining archives. While there are efforts to standardize a system, it is the responsibility of each program coordinator to maintain relevant documents in some sort of order. With high staff turn-over, lack of space, and regular shifting of work areas, it is difficult to maintain a filing system. The environmental program has had three coordinators in the past two years and I found that there was little continuity between the files that each kept. Delia, who coordinated the program in 1996, told me she had boxes "somewhere in the building" and wasn't sure what was in the boxes. I spent some time going through different files from 1993 and 1994 and had a difficult time making sense of what was in there: class curricula, minutes from meetings, and grant proposals all mixed together.

I asked about newsclips and archives and found a courageous effort to compile the entire organizational profile (which includes pieces on education and the Academy, the arts, community organizing, and environment), but it was very far from including the many areas of coverage that El Puente has received. In January 1998, I volunteered a few days to organizing a book of newsclips on environmental issues. I was given a stack of newspapers dating back to 1989 from which I had to find the pertinent articles to clip, label, and file. While this produced a book with over 100 articles where El Puente, the Toxic Avengers, or Williamsburg is mentioned, it was obviously incomplete as it missed some key articles about the incinerator, like the coverage of the march across the bridge in 1993. If a visitor looked through this binder thinking it was representative of El Puente's history, he or she would think that Radiac and McCarren Pool were the most important battles.

Another absence in organizational documentation is the lack of brochures or informational materials about El Puente. Visitors often ask for a brochure or some material, but the only thing available is a compilation of articles that appeared in newspapers about the Academy and CAFE. As was stated earlier, organizations must be able to tell a compelling story about themselves to engage people, choosing which story to print has been a challenge for those trying to put together materials about the organization. I was in a meeting at El Puente when Luis asked a visitor what he wanted to hear about El Puente, "should I tell you that we are an environmental organization or that we run a school? Or that we are building a movement for radical change?"

Outside research on El Puente
In addition to media coverage which has included numerous articles in newspapers and magazines as well as television coverage, several researchers have conducted studies about El Puente. When I told people at El Puente that I was doing research for my thesis, several said to me, "oh yes, there
was a student here last week who interviewed me for her thesis. It's also about El Puente." When I asked what about El Puente they were writing on, no one could really answer. I don't know if anyone who writes about El Puente sends a copy of the work to the organization, but I was unable to track down any of those pieces.

There are two pieces that focus on El Puente, CAFE, and the struggle against the incinerator: one is a chapter in Randy Shaw's (1996) The Activist's Handbook, and the other is a case study done by researchers at the New School for Social Research as part of the Community University Consortium for Regional Environmental Justice. People at El Puente know about Shaw's book and I was able to locate a copy at El Puente. It was often cited to me in my interviews because Shaw took care of documenting all the dates that people at El Puente find vague. Luis says that the gist of the story is presented in the chapter, "even if it's somewhat inaccurate in the details." Both pieces, although well-documented, frame El Puente's environmental activities solely in the context of the fight against the incinerator. While this is an important victory for El Puente and Williamsburg, it is not the only story on which the environmental program is built.

Seeing that the story of the incinerator was already written, I moved away from a formal view of history that perpetuates a single voice of "the victory over the incinerator" and instead began to listen to the multiple voices of El Puente's environmental efforts with a vision towards creating a collective history. I have been writing about how an organization builds power by engaging people. An important aspect of this power is incorporating diverse voices and creating a collective history that speaks to multiple interpretations of an experience as well as different choices of significant symbols. Forss, Cracknell and Samset (1994) argue that for an organization to increase its knowledge base it "needs new ideas and challenges. There must be room for dissent—for diversity that provides the inputs to a further development of knowledge structures." (p.582) At El Puente, there appear to be two organizational histories: the formal one documented by outside researchers and the media, and the informal one maintained by participants. It is the informal history — the stories — the source of learning and from which meaning is captured and lessons are extracted.

2.2.3 Research finding: Managing history through storytelling

After speaking with many people involved in community-based organizations and non-governmental organizations, I found that the problem at El Puente with documentation and archives is in fact very common.18 For various reasons — including few resources and support for

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18 People from organizations as diverse as Grassroots Leadership in North Carolina and human rights groups in Argentina expressed to me how critical the issue of organizational development, particularly managing history, is
infrastructure development, high staff turn-over, and other immediate priorities — there is little organizational culture to maintain files and reports. El Puente does, however, have a rich culture of oral history and storytelling. Luis characterizes the culture by differentiating it from formal history: "If you want to know the history, read The Activist's Handbook, if you want to know what happened, I'll tell you the story."

I spent several weeks in December 1997 and the following January at El Puente going to different meetings, watching interactions and noting when storytelling took place, who told stories, and what did the stories tell. I saw that storytelling is often spontaneous and informal, and that stories are often fluid and surprisingly tolerant of ambiguity. The culture of storytelling is based on both the act of telling stories, with its rituals, tellers and audience, and the maintenance of organizational history through the content of the stories themselves. This culture needs to be maintained by storytellers who have the capacity to bring together experiences telling stories that speak to people's interests.

2.2.4 Rituals and performances: Storytelling at El Puente
At El Puente storytelling rarely happens in a scheduled time, although there are rituals when it happens. There are also many storytellers and the emphasis of the stories often shift depending on the context of the storytelling. Portelli (1991) explains this ambiguity in stories as the process of managing history: "The discrepancy between fact and memory ultimately enhances the value of the oral sources as historical documents. It is not caused by faulty recollections... but actively and creatively generated by memory and imagination in an effort to make sense of crucial events and of history in general." (p.26)

Stories are told in many diverse situations. Common rituals are ceremonies in the form of staff dinners or parties, regular events like the Three Kings Day and the June Showcase, and annual organizational and program planning sessions. The ceremonies help to maintain unity in the organization, as staff who are rarely together have the opportunity to meet in a large collective. The stories told in those circumstances often deal with the founding of El Puente or major events such as the march across the bridge, which was related earlier. The purpose of these stories is to build group identity within the organization and are not directed at organizing a specific and concrete action other than building the organization. Stories include not only El Puente's organizational history but also its political roots. For example, part of El Puente's identity is the legacy of the Young Lords, a social action and political party in the 1970s that mobilized Puerto

for organizational survival and making lasting social change possible.
Ricans living in the United States. Luis, who participated in the Young Lords, will tell stories from those years reaffirming El Puente's revolutionary identity.

In addition to these formal events, stories are also told in more spontaneous and informal settings, like assemblies to mobilize for a march, including the Rally For Racial Justice in which El Puente participates every year. Other meetings to organize actions also include stories, such as planning and writing testimony opposing the permitting of waste transfer stations in Williamsburg. These events may be informal but they are nonetheless rituals because they follow specific formats (Frances differentiates between town halls and assemblies by their content and how they are conducted). Stories here have a more directed purpose of mobilizing and educating about something concrete: the problem of police brutality, the mission of El Puente to achieve safety for young people, how we demonstrate our solidarity with the parents of victims of police brutality by going to a march. At most of these events, someone from the leadership will engage participants in stories from El Puente's history that led the organization to the moment in which they now find themselves and will inevitably conclude with a reflection on how the action they are gearing up for will contribute to the creation of history beyond the tangible outcomes of the action itself.

Funders and representatives of other organizations visit El Puente and a staff person or member is usually enlisted to show the person around and tell them stories that speak to El Puente's work. A tour of El Puente often includes the different areas in the building as well as the Espíritu Tierra garden two blocks away. If the visitor is from outside New York, and particularly if they are interested in environmental affairs, a tour may include other sites nearby such as Radiac, Domino's Sugar, and the Williamsburg Bridge. A group of El Puente members, the Youth Organizers (YO!), developed a walking tour of economic and community institutions which tells a story about Williamsburg and El Puente. These tours help visitors learn about El Puente, and they also serve to mentor young storytellers and reaffirm the knowledge in participants.

Another important audience is community residents who become involved in organizing efforts such as the current struggle against the rezoning of the Southside. At strategy meetings, organizers often tell stories about how other victories were achieved in the past, like the incinerator and also P.S. 16. For example, during a meeting in January 1998, members were discussing how they were going to stand up to powerful interests in Williamsburg. A coalition member said, "we're going to win this the same way we won in P.S. 16". It was understood that he was referring to the time the Latinos had to fight the Hasidic community over building a wall to segregate the boys from the girls in a public elementary school in 1986. People knew they were talking about how they organized parents, and led vigils, and prevailed even though the wall had already been
erected. Comparing the rezoning battle to P.S. 16 maintains the latter struggle as an important part of the Southside's history, and gives weight to the former in terms of how serious community leaders find the current struggle.

Performances, particularly repeat performances, bring out the broader significance of an event for a group, that goes beyond the immediate event to link it to a broader understanding of the collective experience. An example of this is the story about the march across the bridge. While in 1993 the significance of the story was mostly to defeat the incinerator, by 1996 the event had taken on a larger meaning of community-building and understanding the power of bringing diverse groups of people together. Euben (1997) demonstrates the importance of the institutionalization of stories, similar to those about the incinerator and P.S. 16: "the... triumph... became a spiritual foundation and an empowering vision of democratic action sustained through emulation and reenactment." (p.65) Euben (1997) writes about the selection of stories and the selectivity of history. Performances, and the relationship between the storyteller and the audience, foster ownership of history by its participants. An audience sees itself reflected in popular stories about events in which they participated, and thus create a broad group identity. (Portelli, 1991) This form of maintaining history is very different from a more scholarly and exclusive documentation, which often chooses different events from popular culture. (Euben, 1997)

Storytelling is interactive in that it involves a conversation between a storyteller and an audience. (Vansina, 1985, Portelli, 1991) However, storytelling is also external because it is not a group of storytellers telling stories to each other. Storytelling at El Puente, therefore, is most effective in organizing and getting resources to organize. The relationship between the teller and the audience is essential in the act of storytelling. Because storytelling is an art, building an institution based on the practice entails training good storytellers that can engage and weave together many issues and experiences into a collective story. Creating a learning organization and driving social change entails building power. Nyberg (1981) defines different sources of power, including force, finance, and fiction (or narrative); the power that community-based organizations build comes from engaging people through stories, which necessitates able storytellers. He explains the role of the storyteller in building power and creating change:

A person who is good at using words to turn ideas into images in the minds of listeners and readers — a storyteller — is a person of great potential power... Stories, then, and storytellers purvey their power by creating ways to think about certain plans. They are agents of change, rallying for conditional assent to a way of thinking... telling stories that appeal somehow to the core meanings that support and transform beliefs. (p.71)
2.2.5 Identifying symbols: the power of the storyteller

Storytelling uses symbols to bridge experiences into a story that engages and articulates a collective plan. Group identity comes out of shared symbols that are constructed from history and are weaved into stories that get told in repeat performances as a way of re-affirming an experience. On such symbol for El Puente members is Three Kings Day. Every year El Puente organizes a community celebration bringing together talent and resources to “build community”. This gives El Puente visibility and has helped build legitimacy as an organization that can bring together families in the community. When organizing lead screening or bringing people together to discuss rezoning, the fact that El Puente is identified with Three Kings is very useful. In order to maintain relevance, however, the story of Three Kings needs to be renewed every year, incorporating new concerns. Here is a story about the event and a reflection on the role of a good story in inspiring staff to invent a new event year after year.

Martians land in Williamsburg
Then there was the day the Martians landed in the main area of El Puente’s headquarters. Short green people fell onto the stage from where a pterodactyl made of old pipes and papier-mâché painted white and gray now hangs. Comparing us to the American Museum of Natural History, Luis proudly says that often people come into El Puente and marvel, ‘I didn’t know we had a museum in the neighborhood.’ These are the wonders of turning an old church, with its high ceilings, into a youth center and hanging a flying dinosaur right in the center. But about the aliens, they landed in Williamsburg in 1993 because they had heard, all the way in Mars, that every year three wise men (and sometimes women) come from Asia, the Americas, and Africa to celebrate tradition and family, and that children leave straw and water for the camels, and that the Kings leave gifts for all the children. So the Martians brought their children to meet the Kings and the 300 Latino children sitting on the floor watching the play, clapped and laughed at this now trilingual (English, Spanish and Martian) demonstration of love and festivity.

It is December 1997 and El Puente is gearing up for its 11th Annual Three Kings Celebration. The show has become so popular and sophisticated, ever since the Martians landed, that we had to move it to a neighboring public school auditorium.
At a staff meeting to organize the activities, Luis explaining the importance of Three Kings Day for organizing, and why it was important to put a lot of energy into creating a great show. He told us the story of how he began holding Three Kings Celebrations to unite the Latino community in Boston faced with evictions and gentrification.

Luis: We were living in South Boston, where there was a large Latino community, mostly Puerto Rican. My daughter Arianne was a baby at the time. They were trying to get all the Latinos out of the neighborhood to build a trendy area, like they’re trying to do here, where you can find nice coffee shops that sell you cappuccino and café au lait, instead of our preferred café con leche. So they were trying to burn us out, and some nights you would find a fireman running a hose through your living room to fight a fire in the building next door. They wouldn’t knock or anything, they would just walk right in. And the fire alarms at three in the morning. I got out of bed and ran to where Arianne was sleeping and we ran out of the building in the middle of winter, some with our bathrobes on, some with not even that, right? And the indignity of being made to stand outside on the street in the cold, while the building next door was burning down.

We knew they were targeting us, the community organizers, but they made a mistake and got the wrong building. And there in December, as we shivered in the cold, we decided to hold a big event to mark the unity in the community. We chose Three Kings Day, because it is an important Latin American tradition that stands in contrast to the American Christmas. We organized a toy drive and people brought food they had made at home, and everyone ate and all the children got toys. That event helped us organize the community, and while the neighborhood is now very trendy, we managed to maintain a predominantly Latino, low-income area, called Villa Victoria in the South End, by presenting a united front.

Today, so many years later, we’re here in Williamsburg facing not arson but lots left vacant by speculators who are waiting for land values to rise so they can make a profit with our neighborhood. And that is why we’re fighting against this rezoning initiative, conceived so they can build luxury high rises on the waterfront with direct ferry service to Wall Street. And that is why we are getting ready to host 1,000 people to our Three Kings Day extravaganza, and while the Martians may not visit us this year, though they are quite welcome to do so, we will have toys for every single child, we will have a spectacular banquet for all families to enjoy, and we will have an original production being rehearsed right now by our own young members. And that is why the day after the Three Kings Celebration we have to pack the City Planning Commission hearing to say NO! to the rezoning.

El Puente has powerful storytellers, the most notable being Luis. He is able to sense his audience and speak to their interests — to organize a good action to engage residents — and differentiate them from their preferences — to take two weeks off for Christmas. Luis not only bridges current activities with history, but also links current yet disparate activities in the present with each other, like Three Kings and rezoning. Taking advantage of the annual ritual of Three Kings, he incorporates rezoning into the organizational discourse, thereby "creating ways to think about"
re zoning as a central concern, and actions to stop it as important for the entire organization to participate in. Luis' story also about organizing in Boston re-affirms the role of the Three Kings event in connecting the community. It is not simply a play and a toy-drive but a show of power and community. El Puente's identity is tied to Three Kings; its mission for social change, however, gives the event a political tone.

2.3 Managing history through storytelling

The mission of some community-based organizations is to engage people in organizing for social change. In order to do this, an organization must strike a balance between legitimacy and relevance. Organizing entails building relationships with people and building trust through shared experiences and common understandings of those experiences. Legitimacy is important internally to receive the support of residents and engage their participation. It is also essential in organizing effectively and winning victories. Organizations build power by creating a track-record of actions that make them legitimate actors in social and political affairs. But organizations must develop over time and maintain relevance in their work by speaking to new concerns. It is not enough for people at El Puente to be able to tell a story about defeating the proposed incinerator; they must also be able to describe how the organization is currently engaged in a battle to improve the health of the community through establishing employment programs and developing relationships with local industries. This link between the past and the present proves that El Puente is capable of organizing and engaging people. This is the balance between legitimacy and relevance, which CBOs are challenged to sustain. While traditional institutions maintain legitimacy, they often continue working on issues that are no longer relevant to the community in terms of fomenting social change (although they may still be relevant in terms of services provided). Ad-hoc groups, on the other hand, are formed to address relevant concerns but rarely carry over legitimacy from previous actions to justify themselves as political actors.

El Puente sustains a balance between legitimacy and relevance by telling stories that bridge its history (from which it derives its legitimacy) with current concerns (organizing actions that are relevant). History is therefore maintained through storytelling by linking it to present actions that give continuity to the struggle toward a goal for social justice in the future. Vansina (1985) discusses how oral cultures retain experiences. "Every traditional message has a particular purpose and fulfills a particular function, otherwise it would not survive." (p.100) For stories to survive, then, they have to inform present concerns by explaining a trajectory that led to the current state of affairs. Rituals are not formal storytelling sessions, as stories are not told for the sole sake of
passing on experience but rather form part of a broader organizing event — either an action or a ritual that holds the organization together. "Performances are not produced at random times... They are rather inspired by the practical use of traditions." (Vansina, 1985, p.40) Staff members go to meetings and listen to Luis talk about Boston because they know there is a point to the story — to prepare for Three Kings and to make sense of the rezoning issue. Luis as a storyteller also derives his own legitimacy from his personal history and keeps his repertoire relevant by continuing to participate in the organization. Another way of renewing stories so that they remain relevant is by listening to other people's stories, particularly those of residents and members, as they are often the ones who determine what is relevant.

Learning from history entails being able to change oneself as a result of reflection. As new events take place, old experiences are re-interpreted and new meanings are drawn. Storytelling allows the flexibility needed for new interpretations of old events as the relate to newer ones. Propp (1984) writes about managing history through folktales and argues that "the old can be reinterpreted, the types of reinterpretation being numerous. The old is changed in accordance with the new life, new ideas, new form of consciousness." (p.12) Portelli (1991) asserts that "[a]n individual's claim in telling his or her story will often be both to consistency and change, both to coherence and development." (p.61) Storytelling allows and encourages new interpretations of history that explain present conditions, within a consistent framework provided by the organization's identity. Luis tells stories with consistent themes, even though the details of the events being told change and their significance reinterpreted according to current circumstances; this gives more power to the stories, as they can be used in different settings. Organizations build power by increasing the repertoire of stories through actions and also by increasing the number of storytellers, who can then reach more people. An important task for leaders, then, is to train and mentor new generations of storytellers who will maintain the living history of the organization.

The following section will take three stories — "The best use of rhetoric", "Coffee at Aldo’s", and "A march to a community meeting" — to illustrate how El Puente manages its history through storytelling. As has been stated previously, managing history is linking the past and the present to claim legitimacy and demonstrate relevance to maintain a group identity that is tied to a common goal and is reflected through diverse accounts and voices.

2.3.1 Claiming Legitimacy
Community-based organizations build power through collective actions that demonstrate them to be a legitimate voice for community residents. This legitimacy is derived from their efforts to engage people to take action, and from victories. The history of such efforts is therefore a source of
legitimacy, and a key component of institution-building; El Puente built the Espíritu Tierra community garden and so now the organization has the legitimacy to work for the reforestation of the Southside. In this context, history is not likely to be interpreted as simply a collection of events but as describing a trajectory that demonstrates the organization's commitment and competence: from the Toxic Avengers to the CHE Activists with many actions in-between. For a CBO to claim a voice as a community institution and continue to build relations with its constituency (community residents) and with other power-brokers it must be able to demonstrate historically that it represents the interests of the community and it is capable of mobilizing people in support of their demands. The reputation El Puente developed by organizing to stop the sandblasting of the Williamsburg bridge in 1992 led city agencies and elected officials to consult with the organization when the reconstruction of the bridge began in 1995.

Legitimacy also comes from articulating an understanding of the challenges that the community faces, and the barriers to achieving change. As new generations of participants enter El Puente, they must understand the past struggles as well as the many issues that still exist. This sets the context for acting on relevant concerns. For example, waste transfer stations have been a problem in Williamsburg for a long time. Illegal operations have blocked access to the waterfront and increased truck traffic. The current concerns about permitting more waste transfer stations are couched in the experience with the existing 37 stations. Stories, therefore must transmit information to participants, but more importantly extract meanings that facilitate an interpretation of what is going on. By identifying and acting on relevant concerns participants demonstrate an understanding of history and their role in interpreting it and as creators of history. The following story demonstrates how El Puente members learn to understand community issues as well as the impact of their actions.

The best use of rhetoric

"It's the best use of rhetoric," said Luis to Axel when talking about how to approach a meeting with foundation representatives who have been supporting El Puente's environmental program. The young leader of the CHE Activists, Jahaira, was asked to make a presentation.

Luis: I'm sure Jahaira knows what to say. She should start with all of the environmental threats we face here in Williamsburg, the poorest Latino community in New York City. Including the underground oil spill larger than the Exxon Valdez... And then we have to tell them what we've done, something like, 'As young people at El Puente, first with the Toxic Avengers, we organized and stopped a 55-story incinerator from being built in our community. Earth Spirit has been cleaning up, building a garden and planting street trees. Now, as the CHE Activists, we are cleaning up our neighborhood, starting with our own building,
which turns out to be a brownfield. We want to use our afterschool time constructively and tackle two major issues: asthma and the reforestation of the Southside. Something like that, that really sends the image of the importance of the involvement and the courage of young people in the struggle. You know, I'm sure she can do that on her own. I don't think I need to be there.

As I listened to this, I cringed at the thought of having to script Jahaira's meeting with the foundation representatives. Yes, Luis' gift for storytelling has been effective at convincing funders to support us, but that's not something you can force on other people. We always prepare young people for meetings, coaching them and practicing different approaches to making presentations. My concern in this case was having to tell Jahaira exactly what she had to say. But I had interviewed Jahaira about her participation in the CHE Activists, and she told me a very similar story to the one Luis related. While it Jahaira listed the same environmental conditions as Luis, her discourse was not scripted and she was able to link it directly to her own experience. She spoke of the CHE Activists' current work as grounded in Williamsburg's environmental hazards: sandblasting lead paint off the bridge with no protection, the incinerator, abandoned parks. She had her story down:

*Jahaira.* ¹⁹ We have the highest asthma rate, because of all the air pollutants, because of the emissions of the traffic. We have heavy traffic, we have the BQE and the Williamsburg Bridge, plus the regular street traffic. We have a lot of trucks going on the bridge. They were sandblasting on the Williamsburg Bridge and the lead was going in the air... We have 32 waste transfer stations, the highest number of waste transfer stations. And they were trying to build another one, and we went to a meeting on that. Greenpoint, which is part of Williamsburg, actually sits on an oil spill... That leaks into your water system and it can contaminate the water and then you drink it and get sick.

Before [joining the CHE Activists] this year, we all helped to stop the incinerator from being built. And before that we helped to get a park cleaned up because it was all messed up. I think it was the Outreachers that actually got into the dirt and planted trees and painted the benches.

[Of the 12 Principles], I think mastery [applies to the environmental program], because with mastery you have to know what you're doing. To teach others you have to know what it's about. You have to know what's going on, you have to be aware of everything that's going on around you. And that's what they try to do here at El Puente. I mean, whether you want to be involved or not, you're always going to hear about what's going on. And that's how I really got into CHE, because I'd always hear, 'oh we're going to a rally about this or that, and does anybody want to come?' and it's like everybody knew what was going on.

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¹⁹ Interview with Jahaira Duarte, 7 January, 1998.
Everyone is a master in their own field and they just unified it into one big meeting, one big rally.

Luis' and Jahaira's accounts are similar in their content and the details of the environmental hazards in Williamsburg. They are different, however, because each teller brings in their own interpretation of the issues and their significance. It is the subtleties that separate Jahaira's story from Luis' that make it important for the young person to go to the meeting with the funders instead of Luis. The story about Williamsburg's hazards becomes re-interpreted by the new generation of storytellers in a way that demonstrates an understanding of the history as well as a transmission of information. By incorporating the prior victory over the incinerator into her story about the CHE Activists' work on asthma, Jahaira is able to link the action that gives them legitimacy with those that maintain the relevance of organizing.

Stories can build an understanding of struggle. Members like Jahaira have heard the stories of P.S. 16 and of the incinerator, as well as the stories of the creation of CAFE. In the same way that staff members listen Luis talk about arsons in Boston, young members focusing on environment listen to stories that bridge the current community epidemiology efforts to the many environmental problems in Williamsburg and past approaches to solving them that were taken by the Toxic Avengers, Earth Spirit, and WEPA. Similar to Jahaira, members are then able to re-tell these stories in terms of their own experience, having absorbed relevant information about the history and the current status of Williamsburg's environment. This does not happen haphazardly but is part of El Puente's explicit effort in youth development. This includes coaching and mentoring new storytellers, which is an important component of leadership development. Mentoring young storytellers then ensures the maintenance of the organizational memory, which itself ensures survival, while at the same time accomplishing El Puente's mission of promoting youth development.

Because "a story that has been told orally exists in the living memory[, and] living memory... is never verbatim," (Ong, 1977, p.251) stories are rarely accurate with specific dates or numbers. The information transmitted in stories is contextual and not specific. Oral history, therefore, "tells us less about events and more about their meaning." (Portelli, 1991, p.50) Symbols, like the Exxon Valdez, replace facts, like the 17 million gallons of oil spilled by Mobil in the 1950s which now sit underground below Greenpoint/Williamsburg. Luis never tells the story with the 17 million, and Jahaira never picked up that number, she just knows it an oil spill so big that Greenpoint "sits on top of" it. For a storyteller and the audience there is more meaning in recalling that the Exxon Valdez disaster was of an impressive size and that the oil spill under
Greenpoint/Williamsburg is larger, than in remembering the 17 million gallons, which in the end is an intangible figure. Linking the underground oil spill in Brooklyn to the Exxon Valdez aids in creating the symbol of Williamsburg being "the most toxic community in New York City." But for symbols to maintain their meaning, as with P.S. 16, the audience must have had previous contact with the symbol; if people have not heard of the Exxon Valdez then it won't make much sense to know that the oil spill in Brooklyn is bigger.

As Portelli (1991) writes, oral history is mostly interested in capturing the significance of collective experiences. This significance is a balance between the event that is being told and the interpretation of the lessons learned from the event that inform a present situation. People thus make sense of experience by interpreting and re-interpreting the meaning of events and telling stories that speak to that meaning. Many of these lessons do not emerge until after the experience has passed and participants reflect on the meaning. Kaplan quotes White explaining that "stories give to reality 'the mask of meaning, the completeness and fullness of which we can only imagine, never experience.'" (in Fischer and Forester, 1993, p.180) Separate events are often combined in a story to make an experience complete, like the connection that Jahaira makes between the Outreachers taking over Berry Playground in 1997 and the victory over the incinerator in 1996. Both events speak to the role that young people played in actions on behalf of the environment and are both part of Jahaira's story of how the CHE Activists got together.

One of the most interesting attributes of oral history is the interactions that take place during storytelling. Vansina (1985) describes the interaction as well as the participatory nature of storytelling: "A performer sits ... surrounded by listeners and spins a tale. It's never just a recitation. ... The public is active. It interacts with the teller... The teller and public are creating the tale together." (p.34) The construction of history takes place collectively as the significance of a story is interpreted by the audience and passed on to others. Much of the meaning extracted from stories does not come from the storyteller but rather from the audience as they reflect on and respond to what they hear. The incorporation of Luis' experience in Boston into the El Puente history does not happen when he tells the story about the arsons but rather when I choose to write about it, or when others choose to repeat that story in other circles, as happened often in meetings to prepare the Three Kings event. In the week before the event, I heard versions of the arson story at least three times from three different people. Each storyteller added different interpretations to the story: when the context was the re-zoning coalition, that aspect of the story was stressed; at an assembly with young people, the family component of the story was the most important.
As was discussed earlier, history is created by selecting significant events. "But what is 'significant' depends on what kind of history you are writing [or telling]... What is significant and, perhaps even more, what is 'interesting' also depends on the readers [or audience] and their interaction with the historian [or storyteller]." (Ong, 1977, p.75) Stories aim to produce change in everyone involved, both the storyteller and the audience, this change takes place through interactions. The relationship with the storyteller, and reactions to stories that cause change is indicative of "a people coming to understand themselves as spinners of their own webs of significance." (Euben, 1997, p.66) People take ownership of history by constructing it and giving it significance in stories where they are reflected. This ownership encourages action, facilitates change and builds power. "Oral utterance thus encourages a sense of continuity with life, a sense of participation, because it is itself participatory." (Ong, 1977, p.21)

2.3.2 Group identity
The legitimacy that organizations derive from their history is rarely sufficient to galvanize subsequent collective actions. To maintain a constituency and build power, an organization must continue to engage people in new actions by developing stories that sustain the relevance of their history. Storytelling, then, links past actions to current concerns in a way that reaffirms the relevance of previous efforts, thereby building group identity from collective actions. For instance, whenever El Puente organizes an event or an action, members say they will do it "the El Puente way".20 Even when it may be difficult to explain exactly what the "El Puente way" is, members feel they are part of an organization and a history, and this is manifested to them when the set a particular way with which they can identify. Similarly, they identify other organizations with known ways of acting. "We organized the Williamsburg Environmental Summit in a typical IAF21 style, over a thousand people and we started on time and finished on time."22

In Democratic Governance, March and Olsen (1994) discuss the pivotal role that common identity plays in creating the solidarity that underpins civil society and civil institutions. Shared experiences and a common history help build this solidarity. In their view, "[d]emocratic political intelligence depends on the development of institutions capable of generating and using accounts

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20 While no one could outline what the "El Puente way" entails, from the stories I gathered, I would characterize it as fostering youth leadership (as narrated by Delia, Alexei, and Luis in numerous occasions), using creative and artistic strategies (including dances at demonstrations, the incinerator monster, and bilingual posters), and always promoting El Puente's agenda for social change beyond the specific issue at hand.

21 The Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) is a well-known organization that follows a particular methodology of community organizing, foster incisive actions and encouraging deliberative democracy by engaging large numbers of people. IAF has clear rules for running meetings, particularly about keeping to time, which Luis refers to as "IAF style". For further discussion of IAF, see Shaw (1996) and Wilson (1997).

22 Interview with Luis Garden Acosta, 15 January, 1998
that lead to wise collective action." (p.123) For El Puente institutionalization is creating a forum for democratic participation both internally in the running of the organization and externally in determining the future of Williamsburg. When discussing El Puente's role as an institution of civil society, then, it becomes increasingly important to understand how group identity is defined and the role that storytelling plays in articulating that identity. Defining group identity is an external activity, in which not only members and staff but also residents—El Puente's broader constituency—participate. The following story is about a moment in which El Puente's identity and legitimacy was re-affirmed through an exchange between Luis and a community resident.

A conversation over coffee at Aldo's

Aldo's Coffee Shop is really run by Lina. Aldo is Argentinian and has been living in New York for almost twenty years. His wife, Lina, is Puerto Rican. Walking into their coffee shop on South Fourth Street is like entering a museum of popular Argentinian culture: soccer t-shirts and toys depicting the favorite teams, leather carvings from La Pampa, posters of different national beauties, and of course, a picture of Juan Perón and Evita. Down the street at El Puente, also on South Fourth Street, when we go to get a cup of coffee or lunch, we say we go to Lina's. I don't think Aldo minds. He's busy in the kitchen cooking the varied food served by Lina. Lina knows everything about everyone and is always willing to share her opinions, whether it be on names for a future child, medicinal teas for an ailment, or her thoughts on welfare reform. It's a homey place, it's nice to walk in and to have my coffee just how I like it without having to repeat it every time. "Un café para Analia" means a cup of coffee with milk, no sugar. And always, it is a meeting place for many people in the community.

On a fall day, Luis and I went for lunch to Lina's. That's the other thing about Lina's, it is a surrogate meeting room for people at El Puente, since there is little space at El Puente to meet and have quiet conversations. That often means, however, that you end up running to more people at Lina's than at El Puente. And that's pretty much what happened that afternoon when Luis and I went to meet there. We were sitting at a table, I was eating a toasted bagel with cream cheese and tomatoes, I don't remember what Luis was eating. People would pass by and say hello.

One of the people to come into Lina's that afternoon was Luis Estrella, the owner of the travel agency next door. He stopped by to say hello to me and Luis, and said to
Luis, "You know, they keep talking about a resurgence of gang violence in New York, but I don't believe it. After what we went through and all of the work you put in at El Puente, this is nothing! I mean, remember how bad it was then? And we'll stop the gangs again if we have to. That was good work." Luis replied, "Of course we'll stop it again."

The exchange between Luis and Luis expressed the trust in, and the importance of El Puente's work in ensuring safety and fighting street violence. This trust is the reason for El Puente claiming legitimacy as a voice for Latino residents. The actions that give the organization its legitimacy also solidify its group identity. At El Puente the story is often told that in 1981, there was a young person killed each week as a result of street violence, and that it was this that inspired the founders of El Puente to open a youth center. The concern about safety and health has been a key part of El Puente's identity, and residents identify with the organization because of these fundamental goals. Other actions came later and built a more solid group identity. Luis Garden Acosta names those major events: 

23 "there was the time they wanted to re-build the entire Williamsburg Bridge and have the ramp run through the Southside; there was P.S. 16; there was the incinerator; then we opened the Academy and decentralized Eastern District High School; and now we are dealing with this re-zoning business." The addition of these struggles brought more people. El Puente's identity and that of its members expanded to include these experiences through the stories that link them into a chain of events. And yet people always return to the founding moment when the violence on the streets was so bad that a young person died each week for an entire year.

Many of the stories captured here, like the event at Aldo's, have a strong connection to a physical place in the neighborhood: Aldo's, the garden, the Brooklyn Navy Yard, Radian, P.S. 16, etc. While this may not be intentional, the telling of these stories reaffirms the connection between El Puente and the community, and the integration of the organization into the community. The example of Aldo's coffee shop demonstrates how physical boundaries become blurred in community organizing. This allows for a broader sense of group identity, as El Puente takes on a community identity beyond being a youth center (now a school) on the corner of South Fourth and Roebling. The community garden two blocks away also helps expand the reach of the organization beyond its direct membership of young people.

23 Interview with Luis Garden Acosta, 15 January, 1998
2.3.3 The mission: Build power for change

As organizations interpret their history, they are able to articulate a sense of purpose, a larger explanation of why the organization exists and where it is trying to go. El Puente's mission is grounded not only in a vision for social change but also in a history of community struggle for the safety and health of young people. The sense of purpose comes from shared experiences and from seeing change through a history of collective action. Portelli (1991) quotes Ernesto De Martino discussing the need to understand history in order to push for social change: "Our attempt to meet within a common history... A passion to know those aspects of the present which remind us of a recent or distant past can only exist as part of the passion for transforming the present into a reality more worthy of human beings." (p.35) Understanding history, then, is not about living in the past but working towards the future.

In addition to grounding the mission (that is, the future) of an organization, history also informs present actions. "Memories [and history] can be faithful repositories which contain the sum total of past human [or organizational] experience and explain the how and why of present day conditions." (Vansina, 1985, p.xi) Saramango (1996) echoes that by quoting Fernand Braudel: "History is nothing more than a constant questioning of past times, on behalf of the problems, the curiosities, as well as the concerns and anxieties with which the present times surround and encircle us." (p.620)

El Puente's CHE Action Team did not surface from the current immediate need to deal with asthma but rather from a history of engaging in these concerns that dates back to the creation of the Toxic Avengers in 1988. The current effort at community epidemiology comes out of El Puente's successful measles vaccination drives and lead screenings of the early 90s. And in the same way that past actions inform the present, present actions set up a trajectory for the future as part of an on-going effort to institutionalize. El Puente's trajectory of building power for environmental justice began in 1991 with a series of actions to hold Radian accountable. This trajectory was described by Frances and Delia in separate moments; both spoke about the sense of purpose that was suddenly articulated by the large numbers of people attending the events at Radian.

A march to a community meeting

Frances: What continued to happen was this real movement forward in terms of the environment, really going full steam ahead and taking on Radian as a real issue for this community, this organization, demonstrated in two things that happened: One was the walk through the Southside with Rabbi Niederman and the

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24 Translation mine.
25 Interview with Frances Lucerna, 23 January, 1998

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convergence, as it were, of all of the ethnic and racial communities here in Williamsburg, and Luis and Rabbi Niederman walking through the Southside on our way to Radian, where we kind of twisted their arm and saying 'you need to have a community meeting. So guess what? Not only are you going to have it, but you're going to have the community there.' And 300 plus people actually walking through the streets, and part of that being a group of young dancers actually doing a piece in costume around what the effects of Radian could be for us. That was really powerful... And really a whole organizational commitment to that event...

That night at Radian, at the community meeting, I think was a magical moment for us, a real turning point in terms of all of us here understanding the power of community. The power and I guess the awesome responsibility we now had in terms of organizing and bringing a community together around an issue like this. And what could happen. You always kind of think, yeah, but to be in the moment in terms of what can happen there, and the power of that moment, and really understand that it can happen and it can happen in this way, that's really something else.

Delia: First it started with the march going to Radian. My God! I remember that, those people at Radian must have hated us that day, because we had this huge meeting and we had a march going there and a big protest and we just kept calling them on all the horrible procedures that they came up with, the meeting, the set up for the meeting, all of that we kind of called them on it. But from there, then we got the threat of the incinerator. And the threat of the incinerator started scaring many of us. One, the Hasidic community, because it would have been closer to where they live. And the other is that I lived only a couple of blocks away from there.

Delia and Frances speak to the power that was demonstrated at the rallies against Radian. They view this as a victory for the organization and for the community, even if Radian continues to threaten the community and has resisted accountability efforts. These accounts show a common use of storytelling which is to celebrate victories. Stories that recount victories and progress serve to reaffirm a sense of purpose for the organization and its participants. The accomplishment of holding Radian accountable to community meetings, the victory over the incinerator whose construction was said to be definitive, the creation of a community garden in a contested site; all these events help members vocalize a vision for a more just and healthy life and to articulate the power they have to achieve that vision. Telling stories that reflect upon those victories both help solidify group identity and legitimacy, and are a source of inspiration to continue organizing in moments when direct actions are not at the forefront of activity. There are a few moments in an organization's history, like the march across the bridge which was described earlier and the march through the Southside to Radian, which are clear shows of the power that is being built and the impact it can have on the state of a community.

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36 Interview with Delia Montalvo, 15 January, 1998
Multiple voices

I have been talking about the relationship between a storyteller and an audience, but what often happens is that there are many storytellers in a group. Having multiple storytellers reaffirms a broad sense of ownership of the organizational history, as all participants are encouraged to tell their interpretations. Oral history, unlike more formal written history, creates space for multiple voices and different versions and interpretations of experiences. Participants extract different meanings from their personal and organizational experiences and frame their stories accordingly.

Accounts of events change not only according to circumstances and re-interpretations as time passes, but also depending on who is telling the story. This is key for building an organization based on collective experiences, where there is no one true version of what happened, much less one true interpretation, and where stories create a space for all participants to feel that their experiences are reflected. This is what we mean when we say that storytelling is fluid, tolerant of ambiguity, and pluralist: Sometimes there are versions of the same experience that may contradict other versions. While this ambiguity can lead to grave contradictions within the organization, particularly in terms of the group identity, the mix of personal and collective experience allows for different stories about the same event as well as different interpretations of the meaning. What holds the organizational identity together, then, is the sum of these interpretations into a broader significance of experience.

Senge (1990) discusses the importance of group identity in building a lasting organization with a common mission. He states that "[w]hen people throughout an organization come to share in a larger sense of purpose, they are united in a common destiny. They have a sense of continuity and identity not achievable in any other way." (p.354) According to Senge, it is this group identity that then allows for team learning. Group identity is stressed because it is the key to collectively building a learning organization with a common vision. When this vision is one of change, there needs to be a clear understanding and a common interpretation of the past and the present in order to construct a different future. A common mission in grounded in the legitimacy of past actions and interpretations of current circumstances that create relevant actions to effect change. Storytelling creates a space for different people to take ownership of their own experiences and construct a collective history that sustains the legitimacy of the organization as a community-based organization as well as ensures the relevance of current actions by allowing itself to be changed in reaction to interpretations of the past.
2.4 Limitations of storytelling

2.4.1 Organizational learning

An organization does not build power through constant activity but rather through incisive actions. (Senge 1990) Organizing for power is a process of taking action and reflecting while building structures that sustain actions. This requires a strong sense of identity on the part of participants, a clear understanding of the struggle they are engaged in, and a clear vision and sense of purpose that is maintained through victories. While oral history facilitates this through the content of the stories and through the act of storytelling with multiple tellers, this may not be enough to ensure the survival of a long-term organizing effort. For an organization to develop into an institution it must therefore be able to complete the effort to capture its experience through learning. These factors create the setting for organizational learning, because "[a] shared vision is vital for a learning organization because it provides the focus and energy for learning." (Senge, 1990, p.206)

In order to learn from one's experience, an organization must have a sense of its history and evaluate the significance of different actions both in terms of victories won and in terms of how the organization changed as a result of the action. I define "a sense of history" as an understanding of the scope of the organization's experience, and the linkages between actions that move an organization from ad-hoc mobilizing to institution-building. It is also an articulation of a trajectory of incisive actions that are reflected on and have caused change both in the circumstances in which a group of people find themselves and in the way they think about those circumstances. Institution-building entails developing practices that facilitate the maintenance of history beyond individual storytellers.

Because history is a process of selection, it can be said that history creates a frame for learning: choosing among experiences to capture lessons. Schön and Rein explain that "framing is a way of selecting, organizing, interpreting, and making sense of a complex reality to provide guideposts for knowing, analyzing, persuading, and acting. A frame is a perspective from which an amorphous, ill-defined, problematic situation can be made sense of and acted on." (in Fischer and Forester, 1993, p. 146) Organizational history is created to inform present inquiries about institutionalization, particularly around issues of group identity, purpose, and effective collective action. This is done through organizational learning.

March, Stoull, and Tamuz (1991) discuss the difficulties of learning from one's own experience when often this has a limited scope. They argue that as organizations deal with changing situations, past experience does not always help them address new circumstances. The authors
then propose that organizational learning needs to come not only from one's own experience but also from near-experiences or simulations. Storytelling therefore is very useful in learning from experience because it spurs the interaction between the past and the present necessary to understand history's relevance in current actions. (Propp, 1984) Stories then evaluate history not in terms of what the experience achieved but what it contributes to present discussions.

2.4.2 Barriers to learning through storytelling
Organizations tell stories to maintain their history and engage participants. While storytelling is effective in building group identity and celebrating victories, the fluidity and tolerance of ambiguities that make this possible also take a toll on the organization as it develops. Two important sets of barriers to learning presented by casual storytelling are: memory loss and an inability to extract lessons from history. Memory loss is due to having a limited number of storytellers who leave and take their stories with them. Learning barriers have to do with the lack of rigor in casual storytelling. In order for an organization to learn it must overcome both types of barriers.

Exclusion of experience
As an organization grows, there are more stories to tell and more people to tell them to. Informal storytelling can stunt organizational development if it does not take on practices that allow for new stories and listeners to be incorporated. For community-based organizations, building power entails building and engaging a constituency. When articulating a group identity, it is important to understand who is in the group and what experiences they bring to the collective history. Because organizational learning has much to gain from multiple interpretations, it is important to incorporate many diverse voices. This presents a challenge when a group of people become accustomed to each other and are not always able to incorporate others. When new members are not fully incorporated, an organization can lose relevance as well as its claim to legitimacy because group identity becomes exclusive.

Loss of experience
Informal storytelling where participants become the repositories of the organizational history endangers the maintenance of history as staff take many stories with them when they leave. Organizations then lose many stories due to high staff-turnover. I experienced this frustration as I began to track down stories from El Puente's history. While people currently at El Puente could tell me stories they had heard about the Toxic Avengers, or their impressions about the group, there was no one at El Puente who had been directly involved in the group. The Toxic Avengers were a key component of El Puente's organizational history, and with the leaving of the advisors
and the graduating of the members, the organization lost the first-hand accounts that facilitate the sustainability of oral history. Oral historians encounter this situation very often, and while on one hand we say that meaningful stories will survive, it is not easy to accept that some stories have to be lost either because their meaning is gone or because there is no one who remembers to tell them.

**Replicability of experience**

Stories that lean on meaning more than on specific events (Portelli, 1991), coupled with El Puente's philosophy towards learning from action, exemplify the tension between creative action and long-term organizing. Strategies and methodologies that are known to work (and those that are known not to work) are rarely passed on as part of stories. So we hear about the "El Puente way", but it is not a 12-step process that can be emulated or looked on as an example of how to approach an action. While this is good because it fosters creative action, learning from experience is hampered. An example of this is El Puente's experience with in-house recycling. In 1991 Earth Spirit took on a recycling campaign where they educated members, set up bins, and separated garbage. Their efforts were coupled with the campaign against the incinerator, which had as a slogan: "Incinerate: NO! Recycle: YES!" With the opening of the Academy (which doubled El Puente's scope in terms of people, hours, and program) and the decreased attention to the incinerator, recycling in-house stopped functioning. Since then, there have been at least three failed attempts at revitalizing recycling. None have asked whether it was ever done before, and how it worked or stopped working. Here there is a large space to learn from experience, but it is clear that the learning is not happening. It seems like a simple lesson: recycling worked when it was tied to a broader issue on the agenda of the organization, like the incinerator was then and the waste transfer stations are now. But the analysis is lost when the strategy of how to go about recycling is separated from the story of how the incinerator was defeated and the impact those actions had on the organization.

**Discontinuity**

Tolerance for ambiguity in stories is effective in building consensus and shared experiences. Ambiguity, however, can be detrimental if a consistent story cannot be articulated. It can also lead to a sense of discontinuity in history, as stories take up events and victories but the time in-between gets little attention. If participants take the stories told as representative of the entire organizational history, there is a feeling of disconnection between the efforts that took El Puente from the Toxic Avengers to the CHE Activists. There is a trajectory that goes through Earth Spirit, the Community Development Team, the Environment Team, until we reach CHE, but it is not always reflected in the stories. The practice of creating new names as groups evolve, which is useful in formalizing group identity and ownership, also makes the trajectory more obscure.
Lack of evaluation

Because the few reports written are mostly to comply with foundation guidelines, evaluation does not take place through documenting experiences. Storytelling on its own does not necessarily lead to evaluation. Evaluation is a key component of managing organizational history, and informal storytelling does not achieve that. However, my point in the next chapter of this thesis is that storytelling can promote evaluation and learning if it takes on an explicitly reflective tone. Schön (1983) writes that in order to learn from action, participants must be able to "reflect-in-action". It follows that, as I have argued that storytelling is the mechanism by which El Puente manages its history of actions, reflective storytelling can help the organization learn.

2.4.3 Response is institutionalizing a learning organization

As an organization grows and develops a group identity, there begins to be a need to tell a more formal and consistent story. An institution sets up structures and practices that allow organizations to move beyond specific individuals as the base for organizing and managing history so as to ensure organizational survival. This creates a tension with informal storytelling, as it becomes more important to have a common understanding of history and of where the institution is going.

Internal conversations among the leadership are essential in creating a formal group identity and an articulated vision for the institution. As El Puente moves towards institutionalization, internal needs surface that are not being met by informal storytelling: the need to take stock of and evaluate the organization's history, the need to prioritize actions, and the need to install certain routines of reflection on, and documentation of actions. While many of these practices have taken place informally, institutionalization necessitates an integration and consolidation of program areas and a focusing of the organization away from ad-hoc campaigns toward a common collective vision. The question then becomes, how can El Puente make use of its history and of its culture of storytelling to facilitate this process?

2.5 Can reflective storytelling help El Puente learn?

My proposal, informed by literature on organizational learning, was to explore a process to create explicit storytelling sessions that would encourage critical reflection on stories and self-evaluation; using the culture of oral history internally to engage El Puente's leadership in reflective storytelling. The goal of this thesis is not simply to examine El Puente's storytelling culture as a way of managing history, but also to discuss how the culture can evolve as the organization
evolves. An immediate reaction to institutionalization is the urge to document the organizational history. Often this leads to efforts at writing reports and dictating books, practices that go against the organizational culture of oral history. While this is an commendable effort towards documentation, much of the lessons of history are found in the rules and rituals followed by the organization, like the "El Puente way". I argue that this can only be retained by maintaining and developing the organizational culture. The next chapter will explain my intervention in January 1998 and its outcomes, as I attempted to bridge the gap between informal storytelling and the demands of institution-building.
Chapter Three: Learning through Reflective Storytelling

...someday this morning would just be a memory. But this was the present moment...
and he wanted to live it as he did the lessons of his past and his dreams of the future.
— Paulo Coelho, The Alchemist

The idea of reflective storytelling came out of a series of inquiries about how El Puente manages its history and how the organization can institutionalize a practice of critical reflection. Given the need to begin a regular process of evaluation, and given that the organizational history is not very well documented, I began to think about mechanisms that could use the oral culture to maintain and reflect on the history. After reading literature of evaluation (Rossi and Freeman, 1993; Forss, Cracknell and Samset, 1994), it became clear that a new process of reflection had to be based on participants' self-evaluation. In Inquiry for Change, Lindblom (1990) argues that "how ordinary people and their associated functionaries go about the task of investigating possible volitions becomes a large part of an account of how a society accomplishes problem solving." (p.29) The goal of reflective storytelling, then, is for leaders at El Puente to begin a process of inquiry about their own history, and to go about it in a way that helps them learn from experience and imagine future actions (or volitions) that will lead to social change. Lindblom's statement highlights the broader significance of the processes through which reflection by ordinary people takes place.

When I embarked on this thesis project, I thought I was going to carry out an evaluation of El Puente's environmental program. This would entail examining which strategies had been effective in promoting environmental justice from 1988 until now. While organizations often retain outside evaluators to examine their programs, this did not seem to be El Puente's need. Rather, I perceived the need to be to engage in critical reflection and self-evaluation by the leaders and actors themselves so that they can better embark on a new phase of institutionalization. To foment self-evaluation, it is important to understand the organizational culture (as described in the previous chapter) and design a process that is consistent with it. Other types of evaluations have failed to engage participants and are rarely taken into account when planning consequent actions. Reflective storytelling tries to reconcile the need to evaluate with the "ordinary" way that people make sense of their experience: by telling stories.

This chapter explores the role of reflective storytelling could play in organizational learning and I make a case for the relationship between the practice and the activity of building a learning organization. In the first section, I discuss the relationship between learning and institutionalization, interpreting them as simultaneous processes in organizational development. The second section defines reflective storytelling and describes the effort at El Puente to hold an explicit storytelling session with the Interim Leadership Circle that would begin a process of
reflection and self-evaluation. Next I examine the storytelling session, specifically how it facilitates and reaffirms an articulation of El Puente’s mission, and how it expands the historical account to incorporate new time periods and activities that have been excluded from common stories. This process raises questions about the replicability of reflective storytelling, the challenges involved in making it a regular practice, and the institutional needs that are left unmet. Overall, the intervention and the proposal of reflective storytelling proved to be successful at reconciling the demands of institution-building and the organizational culture of storytelling.

3.1 Learning helps El Puente institutionalize

In Chapter One I argued that organizational learning and institution-building are essential for long-term organizing. The former ensures that an organization changes with its actions so as to maintain relevance and the latter creates a repository for victories and allows a group to claim legitimacy as political actors. For an organization to learn, it needs to have a structure to capture knowledge. To make a transition to becoming an institution that can be a repository for knowledge and organize successful collective actions, an organization needs to be able to learn from its experiences. Thus organizational learning is a central component of institution-building and necessary if collective action is to lead to social transformation. In this section I examine the tie between learning processes and institution-building and carried review an attempt to make the tie in practice through reflective storytelling.

As I discussed at the end of Chapter Two, organizations with an oral tradition face specific challenges in learning from their history. (Forss, Cracknell and Samset, 1996; March, Sproull and Tamuz, 1991) Organizational development can help overcome some of the learning barriers by institutionalizing practices, such as reflective storytelling, that maintain knowledge and promote evaluation. In their discussion of the development of democratic practices in society, March and Olsen (1994) stress the importance of multiple accounts of experiences, and how diverse interpretations of how events took place foment learning. "The lessons of experience are often lost, but not always: knowledge is retained in an institution and endures beyond the tenure of the original learner by being captured in rules and accounts." (Ibid., p.177) The act of telling stories (which follows certain rules) and the content of the stories (accounts) comprise an organization's culture of managing history. Organizations that rely on storytelling to play this role may limit other practices that can also be important to learning and building institutional capacity. These include formal evaluations that stress accuracy, and written documents (like a paper trail) that facilitate continuity between staff persons, particularly when there is no overlap in time.
Casual storytelling does not provide organizations with a systematic way of evaluating actions or capturing lessons that can inform planning for subsequent actions. The celebratory nature of storytelling creates difficulties in critically reflecting on experience. As I argued in Chapter Two, storytelling is an effective tool for organizing, but, as such, it provides limited avenues to reflect on the actions. The practice of storytelling must be refined to include a critical component that can promote learning from experience through the oral culture.

Reflective storytelling is an attempt to turn externally-oriented practices that use storytelling to celebrate victories and build group identity into an internally-focused process of reflection and self-evaluation. In designing the intervention, my goal was to see whether the practice of storytelling could be re-oriented to promote the kind of internal development that characterizes institution-building. This means turning storytelling from an externally oriented practice — which is effective in celebrating victories and building group identity — to an internally oriented process of reflection and self-evaluation. The key to this was to provide an interactive space where leaders (and in the future perhaps other participants as well) tell stories and listen to stories.

Organizational development presumes change and learning, but changing practices have to still be consistent with an organizational history and culture. Experiences at El Puente show that if new practices are not consistent with the culture, they are rarely successful: people are required to fill out evaluation forms and write reports on their activities, but they rarely reflect on, or learn from the documents. The goal is to "develop [stories] through comparison and merger of disparate accounts and the pooling of information." (March and Olsen, 1994, p.146) Merging these accounts is also an effort to bring individual experiences of participants into a shared history, strengthening an essential component of democratic participation — group identity and solidarity. (March and Olsen, 1994) The goal of reflective storytelling is to create a collective organizational history that is diverse — because of the multiple voices and accounts — and at the same time consistent — because stories complement each other rather than contradict themselves.

Telling stories in a way that leads to reflection can help participants build consensus on how to evaluate organizational history as well as on what aspects of history should be evaluated. As I discuss later, the prevailing tendency to tell stories that celebrate actions rather than critique them can undercut evaluation. For example, while there are numerous stories about the battle against the incinerator, there aren't stories that follow the struggle with Radian, and why attention to the facility has faltered. The challenge for reflective storytelling is to prod narrators to be critical. Those are the most difficult stories, like Luis' narration of McCarren Pool.
Luis: Maybe it was a mistake that we didn’t decide to take leadership on [saving McCarren Pool]... We had a moment... when it could have been resolved... It’s still going on... but we lost track of it. Looking back, if there was ever an issue for recreation that needed our attention and leadership, it was certainly McCarren Park Pool, and we feel it every summer. We always say we gotta do something about this. And then we get to every summer and we just let it go. I think we have to rethink this one.

While analyzing an effort at reflective storytelling, I will use examples like the above to discuss how the practice promotes organizational learning by setting a historical scope, linking disparate actions into an organizational trajectory, and building consensus about the organization’s symbols (even while maintaining diverse and ambiguous accounts).

3.2 Reflective storytelling at El Puente

On a winter day in New York, the Interim Leadership Circle (ILC) dedicated its monthly meeting to "this project that Analisa is doing." In the weeks that preceded the session, I had conducted individual interviews with more than half the members of the ILC. I asked them to tell me a story about how El Puente started working on environmental issues. This was an attempt at capturing and documenting significant events in the history of the organization. My goal echoed Vansina’s (1985) analysis of documenting history so as "to save sources from oblivion, to come to a first assessment of the events/situations studied and to promote consciousness among the actors of the happenings themselves." (p.13) While I began with the primary objective of saving experiences that I felt were getting lost (compiling El Puente’s history), the challenge of promoting consciousness became the most important drive towards reflection that would spur inquiries about the past and inform future volitions.

I began the process of reflective storytelling two weeks before the ILC session by conducting individual interviews with different participants in El Puente: current staff, members, former staff, Academy facilitators, and other collaborators. These interviews were open-ended and unstructured. I began by asking the question: "tell me a story", and prodded a little as possible. The pattern of response was consistent: At first people were perplexed, and would ask, "What do you want me to tell you?" But then they would get into the storytelling and speak about their experiences. Listening to these stories, my first thought was that it was a shame that more people were not present to hear them. Not only were they engaging, but the tellers were thinking about
their memories and making important reflections. For example, Frances narrated the development of the Toxic Avengers:

*Frances:* 27 It really speaks to grounded facilitation, and looking back at that time... it's about how... is our work really grounded in our mission and our principles, and how do we translate what we do to the larger organization... Ultimately that's really what's important in terms of how we bring about a collective consciousness.

She concluded the session by "realizing how intense this has been, particularly for El Puente." While not all the individual interviews included such as strong component of reflection, most of the participants continued to think about their stories after the interview had ended and would tell me about things they had remembered several days later.

After compiling testimony from 15 people who had participated in environmental activities at El Puente as members, staff, and collaborators, I convened a storytelling session with the ILC. The session was more structured, but still open-ended. We sat in Frances' office at El Puente, were the students' yells resonated throughout the storytelling. I set out twenty index cards with events that appeared in the individual interviews, and invited the participants to tell stories about the events, sticking them onto a time-line. I also put up a sheet with guiding questions:

- **Describe the event:** what happened? Who was involved? What were the objectives?
- **Why is this a significant event?** What were the impacts? What did you learn from it?
- **Which Principles were present?** (Which were not?)

The stories they began to tell did not come from my list, but rather from their own conversations. And so they created ten new index cards. The character of the group process brought out a different set of stories than had been related to me in individual interviews. "The interaction between the historian and the source create[d] a brand new type of storytelling time." (Portelli, 1991, p.62) Because the settings both in the individual interviews and in the group sessions were constructed, the stories told were different from those commonly told in gatherings and planning meetings, as well as different stories told to me during the individual interviews. The collective storytelling was more fluid yet more rigorous than the individual sessions. The stories were more fluid because people added different details to other people's stories, completing the images and drawing out many significant points. They were also more rigorous because listeners pushed tellers for accurate details by asking: "what year was that?" "who was involved with that?" "how was that connected to this other thing that we did at that time?"

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This reflective storytelling session came at an appropriate moment in the ILC's process. El Puente's Interim Leadership Circle (ILC) is composed of the directors and staff who were elected to lead the organization through a restructuring and institutionalization. They are in the midst of reviewing policies, staff development needs and membership criteria as well as designing and articulating organizational goals. An important aspect of the restructuring is to look at El Puente's history and evaluate past actions. When talking with Sonia\textsuperscript{28} about reflective storytelling as a methodology for evaluation, she highlighted that what was critical about my role was that I was both an "evaluator" or "facilitator" and an "insider". Luis explained to me that the ILC had been speaking about the session before it took place. "We talked about this exercise you want to do with us, and everyone at the ILC said 'duh, of course we have to do this.'"\textsuperscript{29} While the storytelling session was my proposal, it came out of the ILC's own work in reflecting on the organization and creating new structures; they understood and supported the aim of the project I was proposing. Because ILC members understand the need for reflection, and because there was a pre-existing trust, I had access to people's time and their imagination. Both were essential in the process of explicit storytelling.

In \textit{The Reflective Practitioner}, Donald Schön (1983) discusses how managers in organizations can promote learning and development by carrying out "reflection-in-action". He explains that through a process of inquiry and action managers widen the scope of organizational knowledge, picking up on intangible — or informal — lessons from experience that cannot be recorded or documented. This is what I have been defining as \textit{incisive action}, and is the goal for leaders at El Puente.

Organizations... are repositories of cumulatively built-up knowledge: principles and maxims of practice, images of mission and identity..., stories of past experience which serve as exemplars for future action. When a manager reflects-in-action, he draws on his stock of organizational knowledge, adapting to some present instance. And he also functions as an agent of organizational learning, extending or restructuring, in his present inquiry, the stock of knowledge which will be available for future inquiry. (Schön, 1983, p.242)

Along the same line as Senge's (1990) view of systems thinking, Schön (1983) describes the relationship between a manager and an organization as a learning system. Schön writes about reflection-in-action as the use of prior organizational knowledge in actions and in planning for future actions; managers recognize their place in an organization with a history and a future, while organizing in the present. Members of El Puente's ILC can act in a similar manner through reflective storytelling.

\textsuperscript{28} Interview with Sonia Bu, 14 January, 1998.
\textsuperscript{29} Interview with Luis Garden Acosta, 15 January, 1998.
The process of having preliminary individual interviews before the group meeting helped participants recall stories from the past ten years, reflect on their significance, and later share their thoughts with others. At the ILC meeting, Frances expressed how the initial interview helped her begin to think about El Puente's history: "I know when I was being interviewed, when I was talking with Analía, it's interesting how each side [of the history] has become merged, you know." When we started her individual interview the week before, Frances began by saying she didn't remember much and was surprised by how many memories she had once she started to recall them. In addition to facilitating new meanings to experiences, the multiple interview settings allowed participants, like Ernesto, reaffirm experiences: "This is something that I related to Analía [previously]." Reflective storytelling, then played a role both in fostering group interactions that brought out new stories and in promoting an individual process of remembering and framing one's own experiences within an organizational context.

Joe reflected on the group session after the storytelling ended: "This process was good, because we prepped ourselves with the individual interviews Analía conducted. At first I couldn't remember much. But now we come to the group meeting and I've already been thinking about these issues and look how much we got up on the board." This process facilitates a compilation, or an articulation of El Puente's history. However, the history already existed, the actions had been organized and the stories had been told before. The process helped piece together the diverse stories to create a more complete history.

Portelli's account of gathering oral lifestories explain the difference between constructing a history and compiling it to bring out the meaning of actions. "Speakers may be... interested in pursuing and gathering bundles of meaning." (Portelli, 1991, p.63) Similarly, organizational lifestories are organized in bundles of meaning and not necessarily chronologically. The author recounts documenting a man's lifestory who had never told it "...as a coherent whole, at one sitting. The interview gave him a chance to connect coherently a repertoire of stories that had been told many times but separately. However, he could not have improvised the overall shape if he hadn't thought about it and had not told them before." (Portelli, 1991, p.130) El Puente's history exists, it was not a question of creating it but rather making the connections through existing stories that can bring out the learning that happens through storytelling.
3.3 Outcomes

In this section, I analyze some of the outcomes of reflective storytelling. I use excerpts of conversations and stories as examples of the ideas I stress: reflective storytelling frames conversations about the future of El Puente. The "Archeological Dig" describes how storytelling highlights important symbols and the interactions help leaders to negotiate the meanings of the symbols. The relationship between the individual actor and the organization is explored in "The Toxic mile" and "How to get an amphitheater in Williamsburg". By exchanging memories of actions participants bridged their activities to articulate a long-term strategy for social change as well as extending El Puente's historical scope. In "Botánica" Frances describes her realization of the connection between health and environment, and its critical role in maintaining a cultural identity as "Island people". This narration spoke to the founding goals of El Puente: community-building through health and safety. Other interactions were not as successful in leading to a deeper reflection. I tried to push participants to reflect on the 12 Principles and how they were being accomplished through the actions, but there was resistance to using this organizationally generated frame.

3.3.1 Framing the future
The brief storytelling session began a process of recapitulating El Puente's history and bringing together diverse accounts of the organizational experience. The immediate reaction from participants was that there needed to be more of these sessions, perhaps in a retreat where they could finish the environmental history and then move on to other program areas. The purpose of holding the session with the Interim Leadership Circle was to tie learning with strategic planning. People told stories about recycling programs and marches, planting herbs and relations with public officials. The stories re-affirmed El Puente's principles; broadened the organizational scope, both in terms of when the environmental actions began as well as the definition of environment; and provided a snap-shot of the institutional memory. Participants told stories together, interrupted each other by adding details they remembered about a certain action, and began building a collective history.

While the stories focused on the past and linked different actions together, the reflection after the storytelling was finished emphasized the importance of understanding history for the sake of building the future. There was also discussion about the importance of documenting the history in a way that can be transmitted to new participants. One of the most important outcomes was a recognition of individuals' actions. On many occasions, listeners were surprised by the stories they heard and exclaimed, "you did that? I didn't know that!" By holding an explicit storytelling
session, participants were able to articulate an explicit organizational strategy: the trajectory was envisioned and did not happen by accident. As Luis said in October 1997, "we organize actions and take advantage of incidents like the incinerator to bring us closer to our own goal." In addition to articulating and understanding history, there was also a sense of current actions as being part of creating history.

*Joe:* It's been really useful for me. For one thing to remember all of the things that happened. But also to see how they are related to one another. Frances was saying how the health and environmental issues came together, it wasn't just an accident. It seems like we've done these things forever, and it was helpful to see that. And we needed a process to bring those things together. It was interesting to see things we take for granted.

*Ernesto:* What I found interesting about this process is not so much looking at the past but what it means for the future and how important it is to maintain our archives. How important things like writing stuff down is. I think we surprise each other with all the details of what went on, and if that had been written, if that had been studied then the next group to come up, another Earth Spirit, Toxic Avengers, CHE Activists, the next young group that wants to be the vanguard would have something there to study...

*Hector:* History, of all disciplines, is best suited to reward our efforts. Malcolm X said that. And I think that telling the stories are about reflecting on our accomplishments, which Joe was putting out that those things we take for granted were constructed by people, they don’t just happen. What we now take as everyday-ness, it isn’t. And looking towards the future, that same energy can be created, can be re-created to suit the needs of the times. And listening to those stories, it makes me want to think about where we are right now and what’s the next set of agendas. Five years from now we’ll be talking, and we’ll be saying, 'oh yeah and remember when Analía came and she was getting us to tell our stories...' And we’ll come back to the same points. And it’s important to know that continuity and that same legacy. I think a lot of times history can be great if we use it that way, and it can be bad if we say 'well that’s what we did way back when' and we keep re-living those times but we don’t move forward from that. I don’t think this organization is suffering from that. Everybody comes to it every day as if it were the first day all over again. So I think that’s good.

These remarks concluded the storytelling session with a renewed interest in recovering history as part of the responsibility towards building an organization that hopes to survive its founders. Joe, Ernesto, and Hector pointed at several needs for framing El Puente within its history with a view towards the future so that there can be an understanding that what has been achieved required a lot of effort (so it shouldn't be taken for granted) and that further actions will also entail careful study and planning (so that each day is the first day). Joe highlighted the importance of having a process, like reflective storytelling, that ties lessons from the past to planning for the future.
3.3.2 Ambiguous stories, consistent symbols

There are certain household terms in El Puente, symbols that the organization holds up as part of its identity. Stories about these symbols are sometimes ambiguous in that they do not have clear dates and often bring in events that took place at different times. At a first glance, this seems like a lack of consistency or forgetfulness, a sign of loss of history. But listening closely to the stories, one finds that the symbols are always consistent and the ambiguity helps maintain the symbol through different generations of participants. One symbol, or event, that is important in El Puente's history is the opening of the garden. The opening has several clear and consistent meanings: the connection between El Puente and the community; establishing community control of local development; bridging community residents and the island culture. But stories of the opening vary and are ambiguous about when the event took place: in 1991, 95, or 96. In order to understand how an ambiguous story can strengthen the meaning of the symbol, one needs to know some of the history and the meaning of the garden. The following story tries to bring out the meaning of the garden so as to then explore how the opening was such an important act of accomplishment that it was repeated in several years.

Archeological dig

El Puente's environmental program is about the struggle against toxics and the celebration of life. A key symbol in both is the Espiritu Tierra community garden. The garden articulates an identity that ties the community to the island culture (most members are from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic) and gives residents the opportunity to re-affirm this by providing a place to grow herbs and plants from their faraway homes, as well as a place to have community cultural events. The garden is also a symbol of the victory over pollution — corn and tomatoes as well as medicinal herbs growing in "the most toxic community in New York City. All El Puente members have worked in building the garden, and most staff have been involved as well. Stories about the garden, like the following, bridges people's personal experience with the place and the organizational history of gaining control over community development.

When we talk of reforesting the Southside, we dream of creating a greenbelt that links community gardens, playgrounds, parks, and the waterfront, that lines the streets with trees, provides shade and beautifies the neighborhood. Between fall 1993 and spring 1994, students at El Puente conducted surveys of the community and planted one hundred street trees throughout the Southside. This was a major accomplishment in our struggle for open space and a healthy environment.
One day our tree planting turned into an archeological dig. We don't think of South Second Street in Williamsburg as a place of historical significance, but neither did we think that the Brooklyn Navy Yard could be a historical site until it was discovered that the same space where the incinerator was proposed to be built was actually a cemetery where war heroes were buried! We still remember the day the local historian produced an old map showing that 11,000 American prisoners-of-war, who died aboard British ships in Wallabout Bay (off the Navy Yard) during the Revolutionary War, are buried beneath the site. This provided one of many compelling arguments against building that nasty incinerator in Williamsburg.

So, anyway, in the summer of 1993 — as Hector says, the summer of sweat — and young people from El Puente were cleaning up the lot that was to become the Espíritu Tierra community garden. The soil was contaminated by decades of cars and trucks spewing leaded gasoline and other heavy metals, and so the young people had to dig several feet into the land and take all the soil out. A load of "organic" soil was to be delivered from a farm in Westchester soon, and the job had to be finished, regardless of the 90 degree weather. Shovels in hand, the young people set to dig. As they caried into the dirt, artifacts started appearing. Ancient objects from a previous era began to surface, giving testimony to lives led in that area generations before the lot had become vacant, surrounded by residential buildings, a church and a bodega.

What the young people found was a basement. Yes, a basement. With pipes and the foundation of a building that once stood on the site. Old refrigerators, car tires and radiators were decorated by layers of litter mixed with used needles and other dangerous paraphernalia. When people passed by the site they used to talk about how they had grown up right there, but it was hard to believe until it was uncovered for the whole neighborhood to see. This had been a place of family life, where children were born and raised; but then the building was razed and the abandoned lot took away the family and left decay. Now a symbol of family was being built on top of the previous generation, a garden to house events and grow medicinal herbs, which would lead us to community healing. Of course, there were pieces of the basement that could not be removed or covered, and so next to the new trees

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Community-University Consortium on Regional Environmental Justice case study on El Puente.
stand iron posts and chunks of the old foundation serve as benches for people to sit and reflect.

Now, did this really happen in 1993? I think when Hector spoke about the summer of sweat he was referring to the summer 1992, when the initial lot clean-up was happening. But the building of the garden I think started in 1993. The "official" opening of the garden wasn't until October 1995, and this dig may have been the last phase of the project. I remember visiting in 1994 and what I saw was still an empty lot.

At the Interim Leadership Circle history discussion, we talked a lot about when exactly had the garden opened.  

Josephina: I would say the opening of the garden, but I don't remember what year we did the opening. I do remember something about the garden.

Frances: We had a couple of openings.

Luis: I think it was three years in a row that we opened it.

Ernesto: Yeah (General laughter).

Hector: This is the real opening. Now, this is the opening.

Frances: Prelim to the real opening.

John: Fall of 95 was the real opening.

Monica: Yeah, but we started in 91.

Josephina: In the summer of 91 I moved to South Second street. And I was told that that was the worst block. There was this lot that we now know as the garden. And it was a lot that was apparently used by Junior High School 50 and I remember moving in and looking down at this lot and seeing this lot as OUR garden. I didn't know who was the owner. I knew I saw students there. And it was around that time that MASH ministry... was in the makings. It was the summer of the measles... They were out there doing the outreach work for the measles campaign. And I remember driving with Monica and saying 'you have to meet this man.' He lived on the block and held the key to the lot. And I said, 'Listen this is what we see, this is what we're about at El Puente, this is the MASH ministry team leader and we want to know how to get involved in this garden. We want to plant medicines and herbs.

For me the opening was on June 8, 1996, when the garden was first officially opened for summer activities. This day, of course a summer festival in the best El Puente tradition, with music, face painting and lots of children running around, matched a lead screening we were conducting. Any family that came to the garden was also sent to the clinic, and any family that went to the clinic got sent to the garden. But I have to agree with Hector and Frances who said that there were many openings. We opened the garden in 1991 when we got the keys to the lot, in

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1993 when the Academy started, and again in 1995 when the construction was finished.

In "Memory and the Event", Portelli (1991) describes similar ambiguities in a town's narrative of the death of a young worker, Luigi Trastulli. Some people change the date of the event to place it in a different context of the workers' struggle in the small Italian town. "What is at stake here is, in fact, the definition of 'event.'" (Ibid., p.25) The question is not so much the date but the meaning of the event. "In fact, narrators do not seem to concern themselves excessively about chronological accuracy." (Ibid., p.25) One of the differences between storytelling and written history is its treatment of facts. In written history facts take on a specific date and features; stories on the other hand play with numbers and dates to get across a message about a significant symbol.

Each person in the ILC had their own story about the garden, which linked their personal experience to the organizational history of when the garden opened; all felt they were central participants at the opening in 91, 95, etc. Part of this has to do with reinterpreting the symbol, also important is taking ownership of the symbol by linking it to a personal experience. And so people tell stories that seem contradictory, but the symbol of the garden and its meaning is always consistent. I understand the meaning of the garden opening to be the take over of an eyesore and turning it into an open public space that consolidated the physical power of reconstruction and the political power of being able to choose the future of a public space against many private interests that wanted the lot for activities that are not beneficial to community residents. This is what was transmitted to me when I started working at El Puente as a gardener.

The numerous garden openings also speak to what Hector was talking about (quoted in section 3.3.1) of approaching the work as brand new every day. Without going to the extreme of becoming a-historical, new members do feel like they are opening the garden, even if that event has already taken place. The re-enactments re-affirm the symbol and the meaning of the experience but it has not routinized it so that the meaning is lost. The exchange about the numerous garden openings also demonstrated an important aspect of reflection: critical reflection can maintain a sense of humor and participants should allow themselves to laugh so as to step back and be able to examine the experience.

When building a collective organizational history through reflective storytelling, participants tell stories and listen to other people's stories. In this process, people try to make sense of their own experiences in relation to other experiences being told and often change their perception of their own experiences. "Stories, then, are especially viable instruments for social negotiation." (Bruner,
1990, p. 55) Part of this process, then, is to achieve internal change from inquiries into the past, not only individual experiences but an articulation of a collective experience. What was seen at the ILC, however, is that this "inquiry for change" is not automatic. Participants have to be open to the process; at the ILC some were more open than others. While there were members who began their stories with a reflection on what they were doing, others were much more resistant to the process and to changing their perceptions of history. Reflective storytelling needs coaching while participants become accustomed to practicing it and allowing themselves to be transformed by it.

3.3.3 Linking actions into a strategy of building power
One of the most significant results of the reflective storytelling session, as expressed by the participants, was personal realizations of the linkage between their activities and a broader organizational trajectory. As I cited in Chapter One, a key moment was when Joe was describing his activities with the kids in the summer 1992 and other people added their experiences during that time, and they concluded that a lot of it was in preparation for the march across the Williamsburg bridge that took place the following winter. This is the articulation of the power of organizing that allows an evaluation of how actions further a broader agenda of social change. I compiled excerpts from interviews and the collective storytelling session into the following story, in which I try to create a similar bridge through a theme of the marathon.32

The Toxic Mile
Analía: In November 1993, as the New York City Marathon's route passed through Williamsburg, several environmental groups including Waterfront, Williamsburg, the World (WWW) and El Puente's Toxic Avengers, organized a large demonstration welcoming the runners to New York City's Toxic Mile. El Puente's Incinerator Monster made an appearance joined by young dancers and other supporters. The purpose was to get media attention about Williamsburg's environmental justice struggle, particularly the fights against the proposed incinerator and Radiac, taking advantage of the marathon. And several news media included a mention of the Toxic Mile in their marathon coverage. WWW published "NYC's Toxic Nightmare," which described the mile along the marathon's route: "the Williamsburg/Greenpoint area contains an amazing array of environmental hazards including hazardous chemical waste, radioactive waste and fuel storage sites, dangerously high levels of lead and other air-borne toxins, an incinerator that

32 I recognize that this story is a bit choppy. It is helpful at this point to remind the reader that everything in normal spacing is my own narration, while the single-spaced text comes from interviews.
hasn't had a license since 1984, as well as a 17 million gallon underground pool of gasoline spilled by Mobil Oil in the 1950s." (WWW, 1994.)

El Puente organizes marathons in Williamsburg all the time, although they look more like track and field events. Performers as young as 8 years old sprint around the neighborhood on stilts in street festivals; young dancers leap from stages onto the sidewalk when the outdoor sound system breaks down and the continue dancing to a beat only they hear; relay races are organized up and down staircases in buildings where young surveyors go door-to-door during a community epidemiology project; and students practice pole-vaulting as they jump with yard sticks to measure street trees. And then there were the marathons — marches and demonstrations with banners and large numbers of participants.

Arthur: 33 We did an action [at Radium] in conjunction with El Puente. I remember speaking at it. We did an action all across the state called 'a thousand points of blight'. It was a take on George Bush's thousand points of light. And that had to be either 1990 or 91. And we marched from there, I believe, to the Greenpoint incinerator. And it was probably the same day, where there was a big demonstration at Radium and then everyone took off and marched to Greenpoint to join the Greenpoint folks to march to the Greenpoint incinerator where there was another news conference. It was a NYPIRG-sponsored event, but we completely relied on the local groups like El Puente... There were hundreds of people from Williamsburg and Greenpoint that turned out for it.

Alexei: 34 It was a cold and snowy day [in January 1993] that we marched across the Williamsburg Bridge and we met with, it was CAFE and on the other side of the bridge was the Lower East side Community Health and Environment, and the acronym was LECHIE, and we were saying that CAFE was meeting up with LECHIE on the other side of the bridge. There were young people involved in the demonstrations, the march, and in educating people. I think one of the things that I appreciate and respect about El Puente is that they never really wanted to have young people be just warm bodies at the march who knew nothing about what was going on.

Arthur: Spring of 96 the law passed [defeating the incinerator]... The campaign to do a new environmental impact statement for the incinerator was in 1995, and there was a big rally at the site on June 13 1995. That was probably the last major action that was taken.

Alfa: 35 I can also remember when we marched over to the Navy Yard. That was the first experience for me.

34 Interview with Alexei Torres, 20 January, 1998.
*Luis:* Over the bridge?
*John:* To the Navy Yard.
*Alfa:* Not over the bridge but to the Navy Yard.
*Joe:* That was the time we got together with the Hasidim.
*Analía:* So that's another one.
*Hector:* That was the time when Edwin Román made a speech.
*Luis:* To the Navy Yard, huh?
*Joe:* Yeah, with the Hasidic girls.
*Frances:* Was that the toxic mile?
*Joe:* No this was to the Navy Yard.
*Analía:* So what year was this?
*Alfa:* This must have been in 95?
*Luis:* Alfa, you would remember that better than any of us.
*Hector:* I think it was 95.
*Alfa:* Yes, I think it was 95.
*John:* Spring of 95.
*Luis:* I can't remember all of those things, I have them all mixed together. You have to read the Activist's Handbook to get the dates.
*Analía:* That's not the point, right?
*Alfa:* So in the spring of 95 that was one of my first experiences getting out and actually doing something, and it was a really good feeling.

*Analía:* Residents from the Southside also wanted to get involved in some Olympic swimming events, but they first had to continue running marathons in order to restore McCarren Park Pool so that they could practice their strokes.

*Josephina:* And what about the pool? ...
*Luis:* McCarren Park Pool had been shut down. And as you remember this is the largest pool in the country built in the 30s... This is an incredible piece of architecture. ... Now, there had been some tensions between the Northside and the Greenpoint people and the Williamsburg people around the pool... And some vandalism did take place. And people talked about a car being thrown into the pool and all sorts of crazy things. And so an attitude arose... which was that this pool is attracting brown and black people into our community. So when they found they had a problem with the pool and it had to be repaired, they shut it down and then they said let's keep it shut down forever. ...There was a Friends of McCarren Park Pool committee of the Community Board. And then there was Independent Friends of McCarren Park Pool, and they reached out to the Southside, to us at El Puente as a primary youth force and through us to Nuestros Niños and various other organizations... This was probably 1991, right? The first thing that we did, did we not do, Joe, some kind of, Manny built some things, were you involved in that? Some place where people could write
*Josephina:* I grew up in this pool
*Luis:* And put it on there
*Joe:* I think I was doing a mural at that time.
*Luis:* Right, so it was mostly Manny who took it on and helped them, both as an artist and architect, to come up with community celebrations that could focus the community on this issue...
*Joe:* Didn't he have autographed wading pools? Jimmy Smits
*Luis:* Right, and Spike Lee, Geraldo Rivera. All kinds of people were engaged in bringing attention to this. And we had marches in the community, we had a major
march where I think it was the blue line that went on forever, the blue ribbon that went on forever which signified the wave and a connection of the entire community to that wave. It was the most beautiful thing.

The first three excerpts cited above tell of three different marches: one from Radiac to the Greenpoint incinerator, another across the bridge, and a third to the Navy Yard. Here are the details of a long campaign against the incinerator. It shows a trajectory from 1990, when El Puente joined the Hasidic community to fight the incinerator, to 1995 when they were able to defeat the project. Sometimes the details get mixed between the actions. The dialogue where Alfa narrates her first experience at a march shows how listeners got involved in disentangling the different events. Luis asks if this is the march across the bridge, and Frances asks if it is the toxic mile. But it is neither and other participants — John, Hector and Joe — help the group distinguish this particular march from the others. And so through reflective storytelling, the history is enriched as the stories move beyond the one famous march across the bridge to a whole series of marches that contributed to the defeat of the incinerator.

Towards the end of that dialogue Luis looked at me and recommended I check the information told in the stories with Shaw's (1996) account. This demonstrates very clearly the dynamic between oral tradition and documented history. Why would Shaw's account be more accurate than the memory of people who participated in the events? And why is Luis concerned about accuracy? Throughout the storytelling people, particularly Luis, expressed the need to document the memories and anecdotes. A recurrent reflection, then, was that not only do participants not reflect enough on their experiences, but that the details and lessons are getting lost because people are forgetting.

The separate actions collected in the "Toxic mile" story speak to a long trajectory, or marathon, of efforts towards environmental justice. When people started telling stories from their own experience, they were presented as unique events — Alfa remembers the march she participated in, Alexei remembers the march she organized. By listening to other accounts of actions, people begin to see their role within a larger strategy: the march with the kids was in preparation for the march across the bridge; the march to the Navy Yard was a follow-up. Neither happened in a vacuum. Reflective storytelling helps make the link between seemingly isolated actions to show a pattern and a broader strategy, the bundles of meaning that Portelli (1991) writes about. This is part of the learning and change that comes from doing inquiries, particularly collective inquiries. "Learning in its simplest form takes place within a cycle of adaptation in which individual beliefs lead to collective action which lead to outcomes which lead to revised beliefs." (March and Olsen, 1994, p.154) Reflective storytelling is a key component of this cycle. As people listened to the stories,
they were able to connect the actions they had organized or participated in, to other actions. By doing so, they again change their understanding of individual events and their role in building a broad strategy of actions. But this can only happen by explicitly grouping events that tell the story of the trajectory, even if they do not coincide chronologically. "Concurrent events... concern different areas of meaning and experience... They may then be grouped with events which can be referred to the same area of meaning but occurring at other times." (Portelli, 1991, p.69)

I included excerpts about McCarren Pool to contrast the marches against the incinerator with those to rehabilitate the pool — the blue wave. First, the image of the blue wave is very striking. But compared to the energy that was transmitted with the stories about the incinerator, it was clear that the pool was never a primary issue. With more time, the process of reflective storytelling can lead to self-evaluation; looking at these actions and their results the ILC can examine the circumstances that led to the incinerator being defeated while McCarren Pool has yet to be renovated. This is the kind of self-evaluation that is critical but also the most difficult. It does not celebrate a victory but rather needs to explore a defeat. Luis began to do so by reflecting on El Puente's failure to take a leadership role on the pool issue, but the limited time for the storytelling session prevented participants from going further into the reflection. This points to a challenge of reflective storytelling: how does it become a regular practice so that participants don't feel like they have to cover all areas in one sitting.

3.3.4 What is the historical scope?
In addition to identifying common symbols, connecting actions into an organizational strategy, and defining environmental concerns as consistent with the organizational principles, reflective storytelling also helps clarify the historical scope of the inquiry. While El Puente was founded in 1982, many people believe that the organization did not get involved in environmental activities until the early 90s. It is easy to drop stories prior to the 1992 creation of CAFE, but when those stories resurface, people are surprised at how far back environmental activities began. This goes back to what Schön (1983) argued about organizations being repositories for knowledge and the role of managers as that of expanding that knowledge. I understand learning as going beyond accumulating knowledge but being able to do something with that knowledge and making linkages between the actions that give an organization knowledge. (Senge, 1990) Within that frame, learning to learn entails finding a mechanism to retain experiences to extract future lessons from them. The following story tells of an expansion of the historical scope within which learning is taking place.
How to get an amphitheater in Williamsburg

Across the street from El Puente, on South Fourth Street and Roebling, stands Washington Plaza. I don't remember the real name of the square but everyone calls it Washington Plaza because it has a statue of George Washington sitting on his horse (Hector: "what color was Washington's white horse?"). You have a nice sight of the statue from the J train, which crosses the Williamsburg bridge from Manhattan and continues its trek through Brooklyn as an elevated rail. But from El Puente, and generally from the Southside, what you see is Washington's back and the horse's behind. For a long time, Washington Plaza was a dilapidated cement square where people went to walk their dogs and other illegal activities. It was a symbol of the disregard for the Latino community, Washington turning his back on us. Throughout the years, El Puente began reclaiming the square, cleaning up, planting tulips, and painting murals on the walls. It is currently being reconstructed as a park, with trees and benches for people to enjoy. But long before the reconstruction began (1996), and before young people from El Puente began beautification work there (1991), others at El Puente were involved in planning for different possible uses the plaza could take, particularly promoting the idea of building an amphitheater there.

Ernesto: The mural [in Washington Plaza] was about substance abuse and part of it included smoking and some other things that environmentally need to be considered as pollutants.
Joe: Yeah, that park was really scanky when we began the mural there [in the fall of 1991]. The only thing people used it for was smoking crack and shooting up and taking their dogs there.
Ernesto: Yeah.
Joe: So we'd go in and sweep up broken beer bottles and syringes with those big park rakes. We'd rake up all the dirt with syringes and crack vials.
Luis: So the mural project really helped solidify the concept that we wanted to create a new environment in that park, and was the beginning of our push to redesign the park with the Parks Department.
Joe: Yeah, I think it actually started before that, though. Because I know that I talked to Gino about finding a site to do the murals and
Luis: Right, that had started before.
Joe: And being kind of new and not having connections. We never really had permission to do that. We just kind of had an agreement, Gino explained to me that El Puente had adopted that park and we could pretty much do whatever we'd like.
Luis: Right. I think when we began to see what could really happen with it that we began to push for the redesign of the park so that it could become a real amphitheater, a place where people could meet.
Joe: Yeah, Gino was always talking about that.
Frances: Yes, that was way before. I remember we sat down and had a talk about the design for what could possibly happen. And Gino was on a committee about that.
Luis: That's right. Because it was 87 when we had the AIDS festival ...
Joe: We also started using the plaza during those summer festival for two or three years. I remember one of Carlos' early bands played there, and we had face painting.
Hector: And the perform theater...
Luis: You know I think it's interesting
Ernesto: Me too.
Frances: Me too.
Luis: No seriously, because as we talk and as we look back at all these activities, and it would be good to really think about putting them all down, really were a push, a political push it you will, to make that into an open space that would be really usable for our community.
Frances: Yes.
Luis: I think we did that purposefully. And so it is a part of the movement to create open spaces. Very much a part of it. And we went through it real fast, all that stuff, I wish we could write that down somewhere.
Analía: That's what the tape is for.
Luis: Yes but it was so fast I think it will be hard to hear.

This story shows how the historical scope was enlarged from a perception that activities to rehabilitate Washington Plaza had begun in 1991 to a reminder that El Puente had been working on the issue since at least 1987. In the dialogue Luis asserts that the agenda for open space took off in 1991, and Frances and Joe corrected him. This shows the importance of interactions in completing an organizational history that no one individual can articulate alone. The story is also a reflection of El Puente's trajectory. It explores how the mural project found a home in Washington Plaza as a result of an intentional campaign to get the square rehabilitated. In addition to articulating how El Puente got to a place where the organization had a voice in the discussion about Washington Plaza, the story recounts many of the diverse strategies and tactics used to make that happen. These strategies included participating in committees (Gino in the 1980s), physically taking over the plaza (Joe explains that they never had formal permission to paint the mural), and host community events there.

Ernesto's and Frances' mocking of Luis (Me too, me too) demonstrate the importance of humor in reflective storytelling. This may be part of El Puente's culture, or it may be general for all collective storytelling: the need not to take oneself so seriously that one closes off other voices and experiences. One of the reasons why formal evaluations may not be effective is that they are perceived as dull. Storytelling engages participants in a way that they become involved in the stories, thereby fostering reflection. Luis' reflection is nonetheless important: While recognizing that the storytelling session is useful and necessary for reflection, Luis does not see its use in documenting the history. In his wish to "write it down somewhere" Luis stresses that reflection is not the same, nor can it substitute, detailed documentation.
This addresses the need that a learning organization has to maintain a balance between organizing current and relevant actions and evaluating and retaining past experiences. Ad-hoc groups organize campaigns but do not think of past actions, while institutions live off past victories and often stop organizing transformative actions. So the challenge for a learning organization is how to keep current actions within a historical perspective. When individuals participate on an action, they rarely connect it to past actions. Reflective storytelling, like the example above, prods people's memories and expands the historical scope: we are no longer talking about actions from 1991, but recognize that the struggle began as early as 1987. Similarly, stories about the measles vaccination drive in 1991 made people understand that El Puente's community epidemiology efforts did not begin in 1995.

In addition to broadening the historical scope, these reflections articulate continuity between actions and consistency in terms of approaches — the famous "El Puente way": The 1995 community-based epidemiology project can be seen as a follow-up to the measles vaccination drive, and a development from a targeted campaign to a family health strategy. The organizing strategies, however, remain consistent in going door to door visiting and engaging people in imagining how to provide better access to health care. These were the conclusions that ILC members came to as a result of reflective storytelling. An understanding of the historical scope, continuity and consistency between actions contribute to building group identity by giving people who may not have participated in all actions a shared history and a past in common. A broad history also gives the organization legitimacy and articulates power. The City Council looked to El Puente as a site for a pilot project on asthma because of the organization's track record with public health initiatives like the measles campaign. El Puente, in turn, now has the power to make demands on the City Council and have the elected body respond to those demands.

I have been speaking of learning as organizational development where knowledge is captured by this entity called an institution. But there is still the personal learning that is needed — what Senge (1990) calls personal mastery (which is also one of El Puente's principles) — and we have said that storytelling serves to transmit experiences to people who were not directly involved in a specific action from which lessons are drawn. In the ILC session, participants said they had personally learned things about El Puente's history they did not previously know. An example of this is the conversation cited above about Washington Plaza. The interactions between different participants (created by the explicit storytelling session) tell a story about reclaiming Washington Plaza as a public space, the revelation that the reclaiming had began years before the public act of painting a mural, and the realization that these revelations need to be documented. This last realization indicates the emergence of a new story, and the novelty that people were learning. This
was one of many moments when the need to document the conversation and the history was mentioned.

"Experiential learning involves three classic steps of adaptation: Variation through experimentation and risk taking, selection through forming inferences through experience and translating those inferences into action, and retention through routinizing action implications into rules that can be passed on to others who have not had the same experience." (March and Olsen, 1994, p.174) Here, we are concerned with the third step of adaptation and we ask whether reflective storytelling can foster the retention of knowledge and its transmission. Some of the rules are part of the "El Puente way", but perhaps the practice of reflective storytelling can be institutionalized to promote learning as well. In the process of becoming a learning organization, one challenge is learning how to learn. Learning needs to happen both as an organization as well as individuals involved in an organization and taking ownership of its history beyond the immediate history in which they may not have been personally involved.

3.3.5 The founding principles of health and well-being

El Puente works on many areas of community organizing and youth development. Sometimes it is difficult to explain all of the organization's activities. Staff members (as well as other participants) make sense of their work by labeling it something simple: environment, arts, education, health. But as an organization driving social change El Puente encompasses all of the areas at once. Reflection can lead to joining program areas and understanding them within the frame of organizational principles and goals. For a group identity to develop, participants need to reflect on how their program area is linked to others through the mission of El Puente for holistic youth development. The following story speaks to the link between health and environment, and Frances' realization of that connection as a reaffirmation of both activities as well as their power when they are articulated as one.

Botánica

*Frances:* There's a moment where this convergence of wellness and environment [happens]. I remember my own personal feeling around that was I don't know how many years ago. But we were here, I was here one evening and I was still at that time the artistic director and program director. And we were sitting around and my mother walked in. And my mother walked in and she had a bag, and in there she had these foil wrappings and in there she had her herbs. She had *ru*da, and *manzanilla*. And she brought them for me, *menta*, you know. And she would bring them for me, and she had them in a bag and she said, 'here they are'. And all of a sudden it was really funny. Here we were at the table and young people start saying, 'ay, mira, ruda' and 'you know what my grandmother uses that for? She

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uses it, she puts it in a tea. It tastes nasty. Because when I have a headache' And then another young person says, 'you know, my mother doesn't use it for that', 'In Puerto Rico we use it for something different', 'In the Dominican Republic we use it' And before you know it there was this big circle of young people and facilitators all kind of exchanging these stories in a very animated way about these herbs. And where it grows, on what pot, in what fire escape, in which back yard, and in which finca on the island. My grandmother, my mother, my tía.

And all of a sudden as I was sitting there something really started to open up. In terms of what could possibly happen here, what needed to happen. Understanding something that Luis always says, that we come from the earth, we are of the earth and it's always so much a part of our experience. Particularly as peoples from the islands, you know. My mother is Puerto Rican but my father is Filipino, and he lived on a farm. His father was a plantation owner. And his connection to the earth, how important that back yard on Haywood street here in the middle of Williamsburg was to them, and how the both of them cared for it. And how every summer it would have tomatoes for the whole neighborhood and the whole family and everybody else. And cucumbers and broccoli and whatever. And what pride they felt. That garden was really cared for, but something deeper than that, it was the absolute need to have it. It had to happen, there was no question that there was this urgency of being to have this garden. I remember my grandmother, pots all over the place, cans with dirt, vines all over the place. It was like breathing, those pots, those plants had to be there.

And so what I started to envision, and what I said to Luis was a MASH center, a wellness center which then became this clinic where we would actually have an herbal component. Where we would actually grow the herbs, and we would actually have grandparents, like my mother or Josie and Maribel's grandmother come in and give seminars and talk about this plants and their medicinal purposes and other spiritual purposes and how they use these herbs. And really have a study, and really infusing that with the whole practice of healing and wellness here at El Puente.

And there, for me I really started to see the connection with the environment. Of that which is our essence, which is sacred in terms of understanding life and our practice of living. And this whole issue of wellness. They are one, when we talk about wellness of body, mind and spirit in the context of the community...

Frances: 37 I remember what started to come up for me was this whole issue of herbs and how we were all sitting around talking about medicine... I remember sitting at one of the medical circles... and it led into the idea of the environment and wellness... and it was during my interview with Análía that I made the connection. For me it merged there. And finding consistency in terms of the campaigns we did around measles and lead screening and all of the work we had been doing. And all of a sudden its coming out — the wellness.

Luis: I do remember when the grandmothers came with all their stuff and spread it out and the young people were eager to find out what was this and what was that.

Monica: Olga did that too.

Luis: Right

Monica: she did a whole presentation on herbs

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Luis: And then the focus on development and cleaning up the garden... the idea was that someday we would have a MEDICINAL herb garden
Frances: It came out of this botánica concept.
Luis: Right
Frances: Which was probably around 1990. Summer 1990.

El Puente does not define themselves as an "environmental" organization, reflecting a view of the environment as being something separate from people. A result of the process of reflection was to renew an understanding of El Puente's environmental activities as grounded in the principles of health and well-being. Frances' story, as related in her individual interview and in the group session, speaks to the connection between health and environment, and also articulates how environmental activities fall within the scope of El Puente's principles.

The accounts demonstrate two key aspects of learning, and how reflective storytelling was able to accomplish them. It is helpful to recall Senge's (1990) disciplines of personal mastery and team learning. The first is an individual process of inquiry and articulating one's own experience. This took place with Frances as her individual interview progressed. She started by describing her frustration in thinking she didn't remember anything, but as she began to speak she realized there was more to her memories than she had previously expected. The second aspect of learning is the group learning. Once Frances had thought through her own experience, she related it to the group and engaged others in her concept of the botánica. This renewed the original idea that environment was about healing and reclaiming culture.

As Frances narrates how she would join the conversations about medicine and health care, in her capacity of arts director, she tells a wider story about how a seemingly marginal concern (environment, health) is made collective by engaging other members of the organization. It is when people outside the medical and environmental field begin to articulate these concerns in a language that is significant to them (the link to the islands, to the grandmothers) that the concern becomes incorporated into the organization. By making the analogy to the botánica Frances converts a seemingly unapproachable issue of health care into a popular practice of the curanderos and healing. Frances as a storyteller provides a key for understanding how environmental concerns were taken up by El Puente. As an outsider to the field, she tell in this story — as well as in the story about the march to Radiac (cited in Chapter Two) — how the organization began to take responsibility for environmental health issues. These stories that link a specific issue to a general concern engage members by highlighting their interests thereby making the action or issue relevant. Luis attempts to engage members in the re-zoning debate in the story quoted earlier about
Boston and the Three Kings. By linking re-zoning to the Three Kings event Luis tries to incorporate the entire organization into the struggle against the re-zoning initiative.

While the connection between health and environment is often made in funding proposals and in public speeches, it took conscious reflection to have participants make the link themselves. As was raised earlier, people do not recall on demand, but need a context in which to tell a story. Similarly, the interaction and reflection creates a context for people to speak about their experiences and to understand their relation to the collective experience. When it works, reflective storytelling contributes to what Lindblom (1990) defines as probing, facilitating participants to define their own links and articulate their work within El Puente’s mission, and the mission in terms of their work. "The significance of probing lies in the possibility that people can change themselves to a degree, that they can achieve at least small betterment, that the can ameliorate some problems." (Lindblom, 1990, p.14) The ILC session produced change in people as participants who do not see themselves as part of the environmental program began to understand their role in it, and the role of the program in the broader organizational and community agenda. The problems here are not only social problems, but also those of organizing and understanding one's impact on the broad struggle for social change.

A recurrent theme throughout the stories is the link between the personal experience with the organizational history, which is the key to reflection. We have been defining learning, particularly personal learning, as a process of reflection on action which results in change. This type of reflection leads to an understanding of one's role within the organization, which is the first step in change. Frances' connection of the development of the botánica concept within El Puente with her own family's experience creates a parallel history bridging the organizational trajectory with the common family history in the community of the "island culture" and the need to be grounded. In the same way that families feel the need to be grounded so individual actions need to be grounded in an institution.

Another theme that was explored by many storytellers was El Puente's identity as part of an island culture. The image of the island culture speaks to the personal experience of most members as immigrants from the Caribbean. It also provides a vision for the future: re-creating the green spaces in Williamsburg as an inherent goal for Latino residents. The theme of the island culture is a bridge to the past, both the history of struggle and the importance of family linkages. Frances narrates her vision of having the grandmothers come in and talk to the young people about the past, using herbs and plants as a back-drop for an intergenerational exchange. The concept of the island culture also creates a bridge between Williamsburg residents from Puerto Rico and those from the
Dominican Republic. What seem to be two different groups, members begin to understand that they have a lot in common in their past and in their history of struggle.

3.3.6 Learning could articulate principles
As I looked for a frame that would help me analyze storytelling as a mechanism for learning, I asked people to tell me stories that linked their actions to El Puente's 12 Principles. While I found resistance to this request, there is one story that comes close to what I was aiming. Sonia referred to the story about the CHE Activists in her individual meeting. I have included it first to demonstrate Sonia's reflection on how the action was connected to the principles.

The 12 Principles
The Community Health and Environment Activists, commonly known as the CHE Activists, are a group of young people at El Puente working on environmental issues, specifically on asthma, recycling and environmental awareness. The CHE Activists were created in September 1997 and consolidated several environmental groups that had been taking on diverse environmental issues: the Outreachers, who took over Berry Playground in the summer 1997, WEPA (the Williamsburg Environmental Preservation Activists), who worked on door to door surveys and recycling in the spring and summer 1997, and the Science for Community Action class in the Academy, which conducted an initial household survey on asthma between 1995 and 1996.

At the end of 1997, the evening program held an assembly with the members who participate in after-school activities. The assembly, of course, took place in the main area under the pterodactyl. A month or so earlier, the CHE Activists had conducted a workshop on environmental justice for a group of college students at New York University. A representative from NYU was now here at El Puente to present the CHE Activists with the "NYU Herencia Latina" Award for community service. In addition to being publicly recognized for their work, the CHE Activists used the time to dedicate the ceremony to one of their fellow members whose brother had been killed the week before. They decided to donate the honorarium from the award to their friend's family, and they put together a performance.
Sonia: Are all the Principles present at different times and in different ways in terms of our environmental work? ... I would say yes. I could say Justice, I could say Community Development, I could say Love and Caring, because in fact they are all present.

And since you are talking about storytelling I could tell you one story, that was very much recent and you were present, when the CHE Activists received the award from NYU. That in fact talked about Mastery, it talked about Community Development, it talked about Peace, Justice in terms of environment. It also, when the young people turned that award and the honorarium and turned to give it to one of the members whose brother had died, it became Love and Caring, and it also was Community Building at another level, and it was also Peace and Justice. Because they realized that the family did not have enough and so they wanted to contribute to them. So I think that they all manifest themselves in the work, but they manifest in different ways and take different shapes and different forms.

And I would say that one of the things I also learned, because when I came to El Puente and I saw Love and Caring and all these principles, which again I was familiar with them but from afar, I said, you know, 'I could live with Peace and Justice, Mastery, but what about Love and Caring? What does that mean? Does that sound too, you know?" But then I realized that they all tied in. That you cannot have one without the other. Because in fact you cannot build community without a sense of really loving that community and caring for that community. And that as a result could bring peace and justice and you will struggle for that. So now they begin to make much more sense.

Among the three points in my instructions for the reflective storytelling, I asked: Which Principles were present in the action? But this direction was derailed after the first story that Ernesto told, which narrated the creation of Earth Spirit in 1991. Luis and other members placed the event prior to the 1992 retreat where the Principles were drafted and ratified by the organization.

Luis: So we weren't even talking the 12 Principles at this meeting, at this time [in June 1991]. With regard to your question [of which principles does the action speak to], those 12 Principles had not been expressed. So the principles that we had were the seven principles that I had written up originally which no one could understand... They all related to Holism and everything. But we didn't have those 12 Principles in place to answer your question directly.

Following Senge’s (1990) idea that learning is getting closer to what we truly desire, I began analyzing El Puente’s effort to become a learning organization by trying to prod participants to articulate their understanding of the 12 Principles. I wanted to examine how El Puente's actions brought the organization closer to its goals. I imagined the stories would fit nicely into the principles, especially if I asked the specific question of "what principle does that story speak to?" This is not how participants reflect on their actions, and I found a lot of resistance to that question.

38 Interview with Sonia Bu, 14 January, 1998.
After Luis' comment that he could not answer what Principles were present in a 1991, since they were not articulated then, the following stories left out this aspect of the reflection. This taught me that reflective storytelling is not about imposing a frame on a story but rather seeing how stories frame our experiences and point to what we are learning. Part of conducting an inquiry is setting criteria for self-evaluation; I proposed using the 12 Principles but it is the actors in the inquiry that have to determine how best to analyze their experience.

Principles may be symbols of organizational identity, but the meaning of the symbols are re-interpreted with each action: safety can mean protection from street violence to health as well as economic stability; creating community depends on whether you are talking about Williamsburg or fellow group members. This is why the rituals of storytelling are important in setting the context for the elaboration of symbols. Sonia's account of the CHE Activists' assembly used the 12 Principles to make sense of what had happened. At the same time she used that story to give meaning to her interpretation of the Principles, which itself had multiple meanings (community building externally in terms of environmental issues and internally in terms of group solidarity). During an individual interview, Frances said that all actions must be grounded in El Puente's mission, which I have been defining as "social change" but which is really informed by the 12 Principles. As El Puente constructs an explicit practice of reflective storytelling, leaders need to ask themselves how the mission is reflected in actions and also in an evaluation of those actions.

In some individual interviews, I was able to prod storytellers to reflect on the 12 Principles. Although I cannot generalize on the results, there were some interesting responses. One person asserted that the environmental program did not encompass all the Principles, because creativity was not present and neither was mastery. Another reflected that all the Principles should be present for actions to be effective but that not all were. For that person, mentoring was notably missing, which led him to think about what was missing in the program that did not foster appropriate mentoring. This was the beginning of an evaluation. It is possible that now after I asked the question, and after the interview ended, people continued to think about the issue. It is also possible that the resistance I faced was actually a demonstration of the difficulty of the issue, which needed deeper reflection. These possible explanations are supported by statements that people made at the collective storytelling, where they expressed that after their individual interviews they continued thinking about the issues that had been raised.

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3.4 Challenges to Reflective Storytelling

The storytelling session with the ILC was effective in bringing attention to the need to begin reflecting on El Puente's history as part of the process of institution-building. As much as it was fun and successful, there are still many questions about its purpose as a methodology for critical reflection as well as how it can be instituted as an organizational practice. For reflective storytelling to work as a process of self-evaluation it must foment critical thinking as well as maintain multiple voices. Also, it cannot replace formal documentation. This section looks at the challenges to reflective storytelling and outlines recommendations for overcoming some of these challenges.

3.4.1 Making reflective storytelling a regular practice

The storytelling session was successful because it was something new and concrete: spend two hours with Analía telling stories. When evaluating the intervention, questions surface about its replicability. Was the success due to it being a one-time session? How important was my role as a researcher? Most importantly, if the outcomes were positive, can reflective storytelling become an organizational routine?

It is difficult to gauge whether I could retain people's attention beyond the one session. ILC members concluded the session saying that it was important to continue doing this process, perhaps as a series of retreats. There is organizational commitment to a follow-up on the intervention. But it is still unclear whether it is to finish the conversation or to create an on-going conversation; that is the difference between documenting history for its own sake and using it to extract lessons for current planning. When routinizing the practice of reflective storytelling, it will be important to keep in mind the role of history in the present and not be led by this need to document so as not to forget the history. History will not be forgotten as long as it remains relevant.

Participants also emphasized my role in the intervention in prodding them to remember stories and gathering people for collective storytelling. Once my research project is over, will El Puente be able to take on the practice on their own? As the organization devotes time and staff energy to the process of institutionalization, membership and staff development, it should incorporate a methodology similar to the one that was created with the ILC in January without the need of an outside intervener. There are staff persons who are focusing on development, and they can take on the facilitator role that I assumed as part of my research project. One of the issues that Sonia raised in my conversations with her was the importance of developing a methodology for self-
evaluation where people can be trained "without all of us having to go to MIT." I hope that part of my process achieved that.

One obstacle that has not been appropriately addressed in this discussion is finding the time to conduct regular reflection. As was mentioned at the beginning of the thesis, CBOs often find themselves overloaded and needing to prioritize, and often internal development falls in the ranking. An essential notion to take away from this research is that reflection must happen simultaneous to action, and it is actually a key component of action. "Inquiry mixes with and advances through action, for we do not first probe and then act but continue to probe and learn in every action we take." (Lindblom, p.30) In order to move away from ad-hoc group and towards a learning organization, all participants must make the time to reflect and understand that this does not take time away from action, but rather it is action.

3.4.2 Making reflection critical
Stories usually highlight victories and accomplishments, often glorifying the past and rarely fostering critical reflection. One key difference between common storytelling and reflective storytelling is that the latter can create a space and an intention to be critical in a way that the former, because it is focused on external listeners, does not. At the ILC stories dealt both with failures and with successes, but many participants still had to be prodded to be critical. Some, like Luis, Frances, and Joe came in reflecting; Luis talked about McCarren Pool and how El Puente had not focused on that as they should have. The hope is that as people become more accustomed to the practice, and reflection is a regular component in organizational process, then the stories, particularly those told internally, will become more critical while not losing their celebratory value. In any case, it is important to take into account that celebrating storytelling must not immediately lead solely to celebratory storytelling, and actors must make an effort to be reflective and critical.

3.4.3 Maintaining and expanding multiple voices
Two factors greatly contributed to the success of the reflective storytelling session: the richness of multiple voices and the ownership of stories by participants and tellers. Reflective storytelling is by design a collective activity. The marked difference between the preliminary individual interviews and the group session can be mostly attributed to the interactions that were produced by a collective storytelling. As El Puente works to compile and articulate a collective history, it must ensure that diverse voices are included in the process. This was discussed towards the end of the storytelling, in terms of who should be brought into the storytelling process, particularly former members and staff, as well as young people and community residents. It is important, here again, not to dissociate the storytelling from the decision-making and planning, as the stories are meant to
inform new actions. While the ILC is a representative body of El Puente's leadership, the group may want to consider including young members and academy students in the process of evaluating and planning.

Regardless of the composition of the ILC, the fundamental principle of respect for all members is essential in building a collective history and future through transformative action. It is not always easy to maintain multiple voices, as participants take leadership roles. While the dynamic nature of storytelling facilitates diverse voices and accounts, reflective storytelling necessitates a reflection not only on the content of the stories but also on the storytelling process itself. As actors take ownership of their experiences and their stories, there must also be a process of collective ownership, where there is a recognition that as everyone participates so everyone is a storyteller and a listener. Part of learning is learning how to take on one or the other role at different moments.

3.4.4 The tension between oral culture and documentation
A striking result of the ILC storytelling session was an affirmation of the need to document the stories and El Puente's history. As participants recalled old memories and began to realize the richness of the history, they became concerned for the loss of history and the challenge in transmitting experiences to next generations. On several occasions Luis looked over at me and asked: "Are you getting all this?" And so the dual role of this thesis was re-affirmed: the thesis as an attempt to document El Puente's history and to analyze how the history is being used. The former to document, as Ernesto affirmed, for others to study and critique; and the latter to determine what El Puente is institutionalizing and how. Learning is a combination of reflection and action, similarly the preservation of history cannot be separated from its role in informing new actions. The goal of talking about the past is, as Paulo Coelho writes so well, to understand its lessons so as to live the present and inform the future.

Recognizing that change is inherent in institution-building, there is still a tension between affirming an oral culture as a positive attribute of an organization and pointing out a need to document the organization's history — or stories — so that they do not get lost. If El Puente decides to institutionalize a process similar to reflective storytelling as a mechanism for organizational learning, its limitations must be understood and overcome, primarily that some of the lessons of history are lost as stories disappear. This does not necessarily lead to an effort to meticulously document all events by writing reports and books. Participants need to take on the challenge of memory by using the organizational culture of creativity and storytelling and design new ways of
documentation. The challenge is finding a balance between institutionalizing (and documenting) the details (and lessons) of the stories and the practice by which history is created.

The most important activity in ensuring that storytelling continues and that history is maintained is mentoring storytellers. As was argued earlier, storytelling does not just happen but rather has certain rituals and rules. In order to engage an audience a storyteller must weave stories that speak to people's experience, and that is an art and a skill that can be learned and taught. El Puente as a youth development organization can focus on developing new storytellers so that stories continue through new generations.

Some ideas for strengthening the organizational and community memory come out of the stories themselves. Many of the stories are linked to physical places in Williamsburg — Aldo's coffee shop, the Espíritu Tierra garden, Radiac, the Brooklyn Navy Yard, etc. One way of documenting the history of struggle could be by placing markers at these places, with the stories there for people to access them. In the same way that historical districts label areas commemorating events, El Puente can create a historical neighborhood.

Reflective storytelling is not a set process with clear rules. There are many challenges to making it a helpful organizational practice. It can, however be successful in reconciling institution-building and the organizational culture. By maintaining consistency with the oral culture, reflective storytelling presents an alternative to traditional evaluations and traditional documentation of history. It engages participants in a process of inquiry by which they can examine their actions and inform both the vision they are working towards and new strategies for achieving that vision.
4. Conclusions and recommendations

La historia se escribe en hojas desordenadas.
History is written in unorganized pages.
— Los Rodriguez, "Aquí no podemos hacerlo"

4.1 Summary

I am concerned with how people can build power in order to foster social change and better their lives. I started this inquiry by asking how community-based organizations can help people build power, and how organizations develop so as to continually organize collective actions that are transformative. I differentiated between three organizational models: ad-hoc mobilizing, bureaucratic institutions, and their alternative being learning organizations. Learning organizations lead incisive actions that bring on past actions to claim legitimacy and inform new actions which maintain the organization relevant to community concerns thereby articulating a group identity and common goals. Drawing from my experience at El Puente, I focused my analysis on the importance of organizational learning and the role of history in organizational development. As a participant in the organization, and later as a researcher, I became enthralled with the stories told by leaders and the impact these stories had on listeners. In asking how El Puente manages its history, I found that rather than a formal process of documentation, the organization did so through a rich culture of storytelling. I argue that institution-building entails refining the organizational culture — in this case the oral culture — to meet new needs rather than adopting a new culture.

I set out to document El Puente's oral culture and found that storytelling facilitates organizing and institution-building by engaging participants in a collective process, building a group identity, transmitting and maintaining experience and knowledge, celebrating victories and building power. While all of these components are essential for organizing, institution-building demands more explicit examination and critique of the organizational history. As leaders discuss what aspects of the organization should be institutionalized it becomes critical to evaluate the organization and its trajectory. Casual storytelling does not meet these demands. Instead of promoting formal evaluations, I propose a process of self-evaluation through reflective storytelling.

In January 1998 I conducted a reflective storytelling session with El Puente’s Interim Leadership Circle. I then extracted key stories and analyzed the contributions of reflective storytelling to evaluation, learning and institution-building. I found that reflective storytelling helped frame current discussions about the future of El Puente. The session also helped participants link actions to the organizational history in a way that they were able to evaluate and make sense of personal
experiences. Reflective storytelling prodded storytellers to remember seemingly forgotten stories, thereby broadening the organization’s historical scope. The practice also served to re-new and re-articulate El Puente’s mission and founding goals. By analyzing past actions and reflecting on how they brought the organization to the current moment, El Puente leaders were able to bridge its history and present in a way that allowed them to claim legitimacy as community-based organization as well as discuss the changes that are necessary for the organization to remain a relevant political actor.

In order to maintain the oral culture of casual and reflective storytelling, El Puente needs to mentor new storytellers as part of their leadership development efforts. Storytelling must become an explicit organizing mechanism which needs training and practice. Reflective storytelling is one way of learning how to learn. Developing powerful storytellers is similar to achieving the personal mastery and team learning skills that are important in organizational learning.

Reflective storytelling is not the solution to all of the challenges of institution-building. It does, however, bridge a gap between organizing actions and reflecting on them. My proposal is one step towards institutionalization, while it is not the only step. Reflective storytelling does not take away the need to document and maintain an organizational history that, as Ernersto pointed out, can be studied and critiqued by others. There are challenges still not resolved, but my hope is that I have contributed to El Puente’s current discussion on how to go about institutionalizing and what are some of the issues that need to be considered. In this thesis I make the case that how El Puente manages its history is a key issue in institutionalization.

4.2 Why was the intervention successful?

The goal of the intervention was to propose a new way of telling stories that can help El Puente’s leaders approach evaluation and reflection towards the new step in institutionalization. Members of the Interim Leadership Circle and participants in the reflective storytelling session stressed the usefulness of the exercise wanting to continue reviewing El Puente’s history in a series of retreats. In the retreats evaluators would be trained to take a facilitative role like the one I was playing and the group would finish the environmental history and complete the organizational history by following a similar process for the arts and education programs. The group of storytellers would be enlarged to include other key participants. In addition to the retreat idea, the session concluded with members reflecting on how they can ensure that this type of reflection is incorporated into
planning and restructuring discussions, paying particular attention to membership and staff training needs.

There are several factors that contributed to the success of the intervention that are important to outline:

4.2.1 Methodology
The methodology that the intervention followed was created to prod people into remembering actions and their significance. At El Puente history is not commonly present in daily activities. Casual stories are usual told by a few of the leaders and other participants rarely engage in active remembering. For reflective storytelling to work all of the people involved must be engaged in a regular process of recalling and re-interpreting. The intervention, then, was meant to begin the remembering process. This is different then the practice of reflective storytelling itself as it is supposed that once it becomes a regular practice it will not need so much prodding.

An important component of the intervention were the individual interviews and informal conversations that preceded the formal storytelling session. In particular, what was effective was the sequence that was followed. During the individual interviews participants began to recall their personal memories and experience with the environmental program, especially those who were not directly affiliated with CHE. After the interviews, everyone continued to think about the issues they had talked about and often approached me to add things to their original accounts. By the time they came to the collective storytelling, most participants had been thinking and preparing stories to contribute. This helped to maintain a focus in the collective storytelling, as people came with previous thoughts about what they wanted to talk about. The open nature of the interviews also created a space for recalling many diverse actions that were later connected to the environmental program. The openness of both the individual and the group sessions also allowed for interactions were people were open to listen and to think about and change their interpretations of their accounts as a reflective process began.

4.2.2 Role of researcher
The reflective storytelling session did not come out of the ILC's discussions but was a result of my thinking on their discussions and how I could contribute to their process. The role that I played as a researcher and original proponent of reflective storytelling was important in making the idea into a reality. While people at El Puente have been talking about how to document and evaluate the organization's history, I took the time to work on it full time on my own. This was an important factor in making it happen in light of what was discussed earlier in terms of prioritizing and having
people focus on infrastructure and internal processes when they have additional responsibilities. The intervention needed someone to play the role of an outsider who could facilitate the process and prod people to take the time to do reflection. The hope is that once the practice becomes routine that role can be played either by a staff person or by all leaders as part of the function of making the organization stay on course.

In several interviews, as well as in the group session, people said that one of the successes of the process was that it was being conducted by an "insider", someone who knew the organization previously and had established a level of trust that allowed people to be open in telling stories. The interviews maintained an informal tone of storytelling because it was conducted in an informal way by a "friend" or "colleague". While my role as an insider who stepped out momentarily was helpful in advancing the process, it was also problematic in that it was difficult for me to lay out my biases and deal with them. This resulted in an analysis that is not as critical as it could have been had the project been done by an outsider. Reflective storytelling will always need someone to take on a facilitator's role, and that person will have to learn how to balance their own experiences and biases with the need to take an objective and critical look at the organization.

4.2.3 Timing
The timing of the intervention was a large determinant of its success. I was lucky to conduct it during a relatively down time in the organization, in the weeks that followed Three Kings Day. This combined with school winter break gave me access to people who are otherwise very occupied with their responsibilities. Although the goal of reflective storytelling is to be integrated into the formal planning process, it was good to have this first session separate from the summer planning period so as to test it and then incorporate it the following summer. Further exercises in reflective storytelling should be timed to coincide with planning sessions.

The intervention had a set time period. I had to finish and leave New York by February and that gave me the motivation to push people to participate promptly. This benefited the process because it helped move it along. The short time-line, however, gave the exercise the sense of a one-time deal. This helped get people to the collective storytelling session, it was only one meeting. Unfortunately this creates problems for the replicability of the process as when the novelty wears out people may no longer prioritize it and so may not attend the sessions. This leaves us with the question of whether reflective storytelling as a practice can be incorporated as a regular activity that does not need an outside researcher but is practiced by many people in the organization.
4.3 Recommendations for strengthening storytelling

I have been arguing that in order to be a community-based organization that builds power for social change El Puente must learn how to learn from its history. I proposed reflective storytelling as a refined version of the organization's oral culture that can help El Puente learn from its history as well as maintain communication links with its membership and its broader constituency. For El Puente to become a learning organization it will have to maintain a constant conversation with members and community residents so as to affirm its legitimacy and change according to new and relevant issues. Exchanges with residents, like the one cited earlier in Aldo's Coffee Shop, should be incorporated into a critical reflection of how El Puente is meeting the community's needs. Organizational accounts should take into account stories told by residents and members as part of the reflection on the legitimacy, relevance, and identity of the organization. Leaders should also promote reflection throughout the organization and engage members in reflective storytelling where they learn how to listen to stories and reflect on their meaning. Building a learning organization is a conscientious effort of reflection and action to create an organizational culture that promotes mastery and team learning. The challenge that El Puente faces is how to build the capacity among its leadership to learn and to teach others how to learn.

It is difficult to gauge the success of the intervention as effecting change in the organizational culture of reflection. Reflection should be an integral component of planning and ideally it should take place without a researcher like myself pushing for it to happen. Given that reflective storytelling presents an opportunity to engage in reflection at all levels of the organization, there are several actions that El Puente can take so as to ensure the survival of the practice as a useful mechanism of claiming legitimacy, maintaining relevance and most importantly articulating a group identity that is grounded in the community's concerns and interests.

4.3.1 Training storytellers
One of Senge's (1990) most important principles is that of personal mastery. An organization is as strong as its participants. If El Puente is to rely on storytelling as a mechanism for managing its history and building power, it needs leaders and members that are capable and willing to engage in reflective storytelling. Because one of the attributes of the oral culture is that it allows for multiple voices, El Puente must foster a multitude of storytellers capable of interpreting experiences and taking ownership of the history and the power built by previous actions. Leadership development must therefore include mentoring storytellers not just in the act of telling a story but developing a collective account that comes from listening to others' stories and extracting meanings from those stories.
El Puente has several rituals that can be used for explicit coaching of storytellers. Staff gatherings already serve that purpose, although it is not explicit. Team meetings can also be a space for coaching. But training storytellers is not simply creating a space for telling stories. Storytellers need to be taught to listen and also to reflect before telling engaging stories. Casual storytelling still has certain rules and needs for it to foment incisive actions like the ones that have been discussed in this thesis. Storytelling is a skill that must be learned like other skills and that takes training, mentoring, and practice.

4.3.2 Integrate evaluation and planning
Throughout this thesis the argument has been made that history is useful to inform new actions and to build power. This means that telling stories and reflecting cannot be conducted in a vacuum. The concern that arises when discussing reflective storytelling as a process to document El Puente’s history is that it becomes separated from planning new actions. El Puente then runs the risk of ending reflection once the history has been documented. For reflective storytelling to contribute to building power, it must be incorporated to regular planning sessions. While currently meetings usually begin with Luis or another leader telling a story about the history of El Puente that relates to a particular issue being addressed in the meeting, the entire organizational planning period needs to begin with an effort to evaluate past actions before planning new ones. As has been pointed out in numerous occasions in this thesis, evaluation is most effective when it is done by the people who participated in the actions and when it is a process of exchange of interpretations and stories about the significance of the experience. Including reflective storytelling sessions in the planning period will enrich the discussions as well as the imagination for new actions.

4.3.3 Engage in reflective storytelling with residents and members
Multiple voices are key in reflective storytelling and in organizational learning. This includes not only all of the voices of the leaders but also the voices of members and residents who participated in, and were affected by actions. The role of leaders is to listen to stories and be able to re-tell them in a way that engages people and articulates a common goal and identity. Organizational learning entails building the capacity to engage with residents and members in a way that they are able to take ownership of their actions and so that they learn to understand their own power. Again, this is a intentional action that does not simply happen but entails an explicit effort.
4.3.4 Critical thinking
I have argued that building a learning organization is about learning to allow oneself to be changed in the process of social change. Reflective storytelling is an approach to critical reflection and evaluation of actions that can be made accessible to people within an organization. It is difficult, however, to engage in critical storytelling as the nature of telling stories is usually celebratory. The internal aspect of the process should create a closed space where participants can feel comfortable being critical. While stories told to mobilize members, transmit information, and articulate a group identity can continue celebrating victories, stories told internally can become more critical so as to be able to make a power analysis of how the organization is moving towards its goals for social justice. This is one of the most difficult, yet the most important, part of storytelling and self-evaluation in general. Critical reflection presents a challenge of honesty and deconstruction of victories. The power that is built as a result of the reflection, however, balances the difficulties in admitting and analyzing short-comings.

4.4 On documentation

Reflective storytelling increases learning from history by promoting reflection and group interactions — two key aspects of learning that are currently not met by efforts to document and write reports. The practice does not substitute the need to preserve the organizational history through documentation that does not rely on word of mouth. I view the relationship between reflective storytelling and documentation as the preservation of the living history (one that can be re-interpreted in the present) through stories and the preservation of details in archives similar to a time-capsule, or a picture of the time-period or action being preserved. Both are important in ensuring the survival of the organization. Making reflective storytelling a regular organizational practice does not take away the responsibility of leaders to preserve a history that can be critiqued by future generations. This cannot be done through storytelling as what is preserved is the interpretations of actions. For El Puente, it seems to be important to find creative ways to document experiences. Much has been done through videos, and there are other efforts that could be undertaken, like the ones I outlined at the end of Chapter Three. Creativity has been a prominent principle in my observations and it remains so in the recommendations about how El Puente can manage and learn from its history.
4.5 Final remarks

4.5.1 Replicability
The primary audience of this thesis is the leadership of El Puente. The intervention was focused on them and not on all participants, and it did not include comparisons with other organizations. There are, however, a few things that can be said in the form of concluding remarks that can have significance for other organizations exploring creative mechanisms for learning.

Many aspects of the intervention, which provided the biggest source of analysis in this thesis, were specific to the circumstances. One cannot expect all evaluators to straddle an insider/outsider role, nor can we expect participants in organizations to openly discuss their history at any moment. There are certain principles of evaluation that were explored and promoted through this process. The first is that an indicator model with pre-conceived definitions of success and markers for learning is always useful. In order to engage in meaningful evaluation and reflection there must be a degree of creativity and invention that takes place for participants to have access to what they see as significant and successful actions. Reflective storytelling does not present an alternative but still standard evaluation methodology. Rather it came out of an evaluation process that first took account of the organizational culture and then intervened to use that culture as a way of conducting a self-evaluation.

Another principle of self-evaluation is that people must want to engage in it. While all evaluations need someone to take a facilitative role, the initial effort must come from participants who understand the benefits of reflection that is tied to planning. When assessing the role of history in organizational functions it is important to understand what the real problem is. Storytelling poses two distinct challenges that must be differentiated in order to be dealt with. The first is the loss of information and actual forgetting due to lack of documentation. This is different from the inability to extract lessons from history through inquiry. The latter is resolved by learning how to learn. People remember actions but do not articulate stories in a way that promotes learning. It is this challenge that this thesis has tried to address.

4.5.2 On the presentation
The presentation of the stories I gathered and their significance has not always been straight forward. It may have been easier to write up a chronological history or a matrix of lessons learned but that is not how history is created. Part of the disorganization and round-about way of telling things in this thesis have tried to parallel how storytelling works. While I tried to clarify the
inferences and draw out the significance of each story, many of the interpretations still rest with the reader.

In this thesis I have made a case for the importance of critical reflection in learning. One of the short-comings of this project, unfortunately, is my own failure at practicing this same practice. My biases towards El Puente and specifically towards the weight of the environmental program within the organization may have clouded the critical analysis necessary. While my previous experience with the organization was helpful in the research process, it was not so helpful in the analytical component. In presenting the stories as the history of El Puente, many of them stress the garden as a key symbol. Had I not worked in the garden, would I have stressed it so much? Either way, isn't that a compelling argument for including multiple voices in the organizational history? The hope is that as others at El Puente begin to reflect on the stories told, that they will come up with a different analysis of the history and that these efforts will contribute to a larger collective history with which participants can identify and in that way build power through collective action.
Appendix 1: An attempt at a time-line.

Chronological Time-line

1981  • One young person dies each week as result of gang violence
1982  • El Puente is founded.
1986  • Controversy about PS 16.
1987  • AIDS festivals.
       • Conversations about building amphitheater in Washington Plaza begin.
1988  • First Three Kings Day celebration
       • Toxic Avengers are formed as part of I Have A Dream alternative school program.
       • Dinkins is elected as mayor of New York City

1991  Spring
       • Rabbi Niederman and Luis Garden Acosta lead march through the Southside to Radians. 300+ people protest the facility's lack of transparency and community involvement. Dancers perform at the march a piece on the dangers of Radians.
       • First Radians Town Meeting with members from all ethnicities in the community.

Summer
       • Earth Spirit is created and takes on recycling and environmental education.
       • Measles epidemic: MASH Ministry is created, conducts health survey (first epidemiological effort), and organizes vaccination campaign where 1000+ residents received free vaccination at El Puente.
       • Workshops on herbs; conversations about herbal medicine with MASH Ministry.

Fall
       • Mural in Washington Plaza, bulb planting in Washington Plaza.
       • El Puente gets keys to S. Second street lot (what would become the garden)

1992  Spring
       • First Williamsburg Environmental Town Meeting at PS 16. 1000+ attend, CAFE is created to unite Williamsburg different ethnic communities against the proposed Brooklyn Navy Yard incinerator.

Summer
       • "Summer of sweat"-- clean-up begins at S. Second Street.
       • Summer festivals throughout community. Events include presentations by the Toxic Avengers about Radians and the proposed incinerator. Organizing towards March across the bridge to happen in Winter.
       • Kids' parade led by Joe with masks and drums across the Williamsburg Bridge.
       • Sandblasting begins on the Williamsburg Bridge with not protection.
       • Bus accident drives collaboration between Latinos and Hasidim, crisis center set up at El Puente (Alexei).

Fall
       • March across the bridge is postponed due to housing crisis.
1993

Winter
• Martians join us for Three Kings Day.
• March across the bridge on Martin Luther King Jr Day, CAFE con LECHE, 1,200 people march in the snow to protest proposed incinerator.

Summer
• Lead screening campaign in reaction to sandblasting catastrophe.
• Law suit brings injunction on sandblasting.
• Preparation for opening of Academy: lead and asbestos abatement of El Puente
• Clean-up and construction continues in the garden.

Fall
• Academy opens.
• Vaccination round 3.
• 100 trees are planted as result of community surveys.
• Toxic Mile demonstration at NYC Marathon.

1994

Summer
• Clean-up and construction continues in the garden.

Fall
• Last Radiac meeting El Puente mobilized around.
• Planting in back of building (Alfa).

1995

Summer
• March to Brooklyn Navy Yard. Students from Academy join young people from UJO.

Fall
• Garden opening.
• Academy begins asthma and environmental awareness survey.

1996

Spring
• Governor Pataki outlaws incinerator project.
• Science for Community Action class looks at integrating science curriculum with community concerns.

Summer
• Garden opens for the summer simultaneously with lead screening.
• Reconstruction of Washington Plaza by City Parks Department begins.

Fall
• Pollution Prevention workshops focus on adult education and strategies for environmental clean-up of industries like the dry cleaners.

1997

Summer
• El Puente takes over Berry playground (Outreachers)
• Williamsburg Environmental Preservation Activists (WEPA) begin recycling again

Fall
• City proposes to increase waste transfer stations in Williamsburg. Academy takes on campaign to deny more permits for waste transfer stations.
• CHE Activists begin training on asthma and epidemiology.
References


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