LEARNING
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The World We Want

Intersecting Conversations
on Education, Culture, and Community

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From words to action

CONFERENCE   PROCEEDINGS

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Evaluation Model for an Undergraduate Action Research Program ©

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Overview

We, the collaborators in a three-year long service learning effort with surrounding communities combined with an undergraduate action research course, articulate how we have evolved a model of "evaluation being central to learning, teaching, and living Action Research. (AR)." This AR Evaluation (ARE) Model has evolved with the Bartels Undergraduate Action Research Fellows demonstration Program at Cornell University (henceforth, the program). We will describe the program and the evaluation model as developed in action.

The model is centered on the Fellows' participation in reflective analysis of their self-generated data. The goal is to learn about AR by actually using evaluation tools to understand their own learning process, particularly how their previously acquired learning behaviors stand in the way of their being able to help their community partners solve issues of joint interest. The ethical issues regarding research on human subjects are addressed by the very nature of AR, because community partners voluntarily participate in defining issues of interest, selecting methods and tools, generating and interpreting their own data, and deciding on the solutions. These community partners are interested in finding sustainable and fair solutions to issues such as North American Indian women's health, college hazing, stereotyping, homelessness, youth conflicts and empowerment, incarceration, migrant farm workers, university students' mental health, and community development. The persistence of these problems has been reinforced by the passive conventional learning/teaching/research approach. This reflective view is what we, the collaborators, hope will 'click' for the Fellows when they examine their own self-evaluation data. From this, we hope to learn how:

(1) The undergraduate AR seminar instructional process has imparted the epistemology and methodology of Participatory Action Research to the participating Fellows

(2) What factors have limited or facilitated the process, and

(3) How the university organizational structure provides support or limits the faculty and staff who mentor the participating Fellows in service learning.

In other words, we hope to understand how best to realize AR in a participatory learning environment that is based in participatory community development. This means taking risk with unknowns, whether the community or the Fellows, while maintaining the highest possible ethical standards by insisting on viewing community members as collaborators who can generate their own knowledge and rejecting the view of the collaborating community as the "other."

We briefly discuss the Participatory Action Evaluation (PAE) model and describe the program and the evaluation model in action. Next, we present the perspective of one of the Fellows who developed some first year evaluation results and we show their centrality to reframing the program. This is followed by some observations of the Graduate Teaching Assistant. We conclude with the theoretical implications for the development of both the program and the evaluation model.

We argue that working in the real world actually creates a meaning of service learning and of research that differs from that found in the general practices and notions of service learning and research. Among other things, research-based civic participation, if it

does nothing else, presses home the weaknesses in on-campus research training and provides a way to address those weaknesses as well. To insure that we address the weaknesses we discover, we involve the Fellows in both evaluating their own learning, including the seminar design, and their services, including the involvement of their community partners in the research process.

If we compare the Bartels Fellows to a broader sample of undergraduates, we will find them to be very much like their peers -- generally innocent of research skills, other than taking notes, going to the library, and writing synthetic critiques. Because we are concentrating on their research and facilitation skills, it is likely that our Fellows might look to us as particularly weak. However, this is important because we believe that evaluation is just as critical to instruction as it is to securing a reliable research outcome. The Fellows, through their own self-evaluation, assist us in insuring a relevant and high quality educational experience and better quality and sustainable community service and self-generated research.

Key Characteristics of PAR and the Program

Greenwood and Levin (1998: 6) define action research as "a form of research that generates knowledge claims for the express purpose of taking action to promote social change and social analysis [wherein involved members may] control their destinies and improve their capacities to do so." Participatory Action Research (PAR) emphasizes social problems confronting society's most marginal individuals, families and communities. It calls for active involvement of local residents as co-investigators at each and every step of the research process, with a commitment to go beyond describing "what is" to creating "what might be." Other characteristics of PAR constitute willingness to act on less than perfect information, appreciation of the non-linear nature of social inquiry, commitment to enhancing the research and development capacity of local actors and agencies, and desire to widely disseminate research methodologies and findings.

PAR research differs from positivist research as follows:
1. Its goal is to promote more just world, and not just to describe the world as is.
2. The process is non-linear.
3. The agency belongs to the co-researchers who work as a team, including all the relevant stakeholders from the community as well as university researchers.
4. Truth is defined by achieving desired results in the world and not by replication of results using certain methods.

The Henry E. and Nancy Horton Bartels Undergraduate Action Research Fellows Program as summarized by its founder and director, Davydd Greenwood, is intended to link a group of undergraduates interested in integrating action research-based service learning into their academic preparation with an organized network [board] of faculty and extension staff, who are experts in the practice of action research. This program emerged out of an informal conversation between a Cornell University alumnus/benefactor and an anthropology professor regarding ways to enhance the quality of undergraduate education. A proposal was developed offering undergraduates the opportunity to pursue independent research on issues of critical importance to the Cornell and Ithaca community at large, Tompkins County, and communities in the State of New York and neighboring Canada using PAR methods. The program was

designed as a three-year demonstration effort managed by a volunteer faculty team led by Davydd Greenwood. The program is funded through a gift to Cornell. In addition, the Cornell Public Service Center (PSC) provides critical administrative and budgetary support. Students who are selected as Bartels Fellows receive supplemental financial aid and research support. Eight-ten students participate each year in field-based research and a year long, bi-weekly, 2-credit (each semester) seminar.

Proposals from undergraduate students are expected to meet the following criteria:
- designate a concrete location for the work, having already developed connections with the organization or community with which the student would work.
- provide a well-developed topical focus. The topic should have been identified by the community with which the student will be involved.

- demonstrate that the community agency or group will have significant involvement and control over the research activities and findings.
- clearly show the way this service learning activity can integrate into the rest of the student's program of undergraduate study.
- provide a plan to ensure the continuity of Cornell's relationship with the community organization or group after the current student has completed his/her degree program.

Preference is given to projects that plan for more than a single year of activity. At the end of each semester, the students are required to submit a written report of their activities, reflections, and lessons learned to the Board. To support these efforts, the Bartels Undergraduate Action Research Fellows Board links undergraduate students to specific faculty or staff advisors, holds public action research consultations with the Bartels Undergraduate Action Research Fellows to enhance their projects, and keeps an archive of the projects engaged in for the benefit of future generations of Fellows.

The Bartels' PAR Seminar

The Bartels' PAR Seminar is an interdisciplinary, inter-college seminar. A team of faculty co-teaches this two-credit course on a voluntary basis in the fall and spring semesters. The seminar meets two to three hours every other week, plus one-on-one meetings with the Graduate Teaching Assistant, supported by the PSC. The class features time for individual problem solving as well as lecture and discussion. Seminar topics include historical origins of PAR, key PAR principles, comparison to positivist social sciences, ethical responsibilities/human subject review, entering the community, quantitative and qualitative research methods, basic research design and data collection, and maintaining partner relation and data analysis.

The Bartels Program's unique qualities are:

1. The role of students shifts from passive to active learning mode.
2. Students serve as co-leaders in a "real world" social change process that they help create rather than participate in a process designed by others.
3. Extremely diverse group of learners, fewer "taken for granted" assumptions, more teachable moments.
4. Intentionally interdisciplinary faculty.

5. Fellowship requires partnerships that mediate conventional divisions of class, race, ethnicity, religion, age, and gender.
6. Ithaca residents participate in the seminar occasionally, and in the problem identification, data analysis, and program evaluation phase of the project.
7. Participatory evaluation has been central to reframing and re-shaping the Bartels program and, to a certain extent, facilitated the positive transformation of some of student projects, as well as their own learning process.
8. This is the only field-based PAR course for undergraduates currently being offered at CU and may be one of the few in the US that takes this form.

The Evaluation Model in Action

The evaluation model for this program differs from the standard summative and formative evaluation procedures. In a conventional curricular development and evaluation, we usually ask the following five questions as a benchmark: What, Why, Who, When, and Where. In a participatory action research learning process, we add the "How" question. We are not only interested in the descriptive, linear properties, but we like to probe deeper to understand how the entire PAR process facilitates the transformation process of the learner, the notion of social science research, and the real world social change.

Conventional education models had followed either the Factory Model metaphor or what is known as the naturalistic or responsive approaches to schooling (Stufflebeam, et al., 2000: 22-23). Although PAR curriculum design is a more recent phenomenon in higher education institutions, its goals and strategies resemble those practiced in alternative educational programs, particularly informal and adult education programs both in the developing and developed worlds.

One way of knowing/learning in the PAR curriculum starts with investigating and validating available knowledge, stimulating discussion about noted connections, directing unleashed forces and relations, underlining of relations that realize possibilities. Therefore, the way of conducting a PAE of a PAR curriculum is by making evaluation central to the learning/knowing process. That is, the focus of the PAE is not on the planned course or syllabus or the service learning project (s), rather on the collaborators' ability to realize that social change will not take place without a change in their own individual and collective understanding of AR (acting and reflecting on their own inquiry), of service learning, and of organizational behavior.

The tools for this model are drawn from the fields of anthropological techniques, adult literacy strategies, feminist ways of knowing, and others. They consist of long-term, direct and/or participant observation, open-ended interviews, document analysis, in-depth-case studies, indirect paper-and-pencil data collection, such as responding to survey questionnaires, and so on.

The more specific goal of this collaborative participatory model has been to understand (a) the process that the faculty and staff advisors have been using to connect with the Fellows, and (b) how the learning process in the seminar helps the Fellows adjust to action research environment and to the demands of their individual projects.

A Fellow's Reflection and Self-Evaluation

Jamecia Lynn Finnie describes the change in her outlook concerning her service project. As a co-facilitator of the self-evaluation process, she also explains how a research-based hands-on-experience helped her realize and understand the evolution of her service project and the different meanings of social research:

In the spring of 2001, the end of my sophomore year, the words 'participatory action research' were meaningless. I was going through an important transition in my life—realizing that I was frustrated with my major and circumstances surrounding my life. I had spent two years going through the rigorous pre-med program at Cornell and I was fed up; I didn't enjoy my classes, or the impact they were having on my life. While in the midst of trying to understand the changes taking place in my heart concerning my career, I was also extremely frustrated with my surrounding communities and the discussions (or as I saw it lack of action) taking place in Cornell classrooms to help our community. Cornell classrooms appeared to be places where students only talked about the problems occurring in the world, but made little effort to get out in the community and help address the issues so eloquently discussed in a closed classroom.

Well, in the midst of my own personal chaos—struggling with classes, majors, and personal problems—I stumbled upon the Bartels Fellowship. It is quite interesting and definitely not ironic that 'chaos' led me to the Bartels Fellowship because in its own form, participatory action research is a type of 'organized chaos.' This is why it takes so much time, patience, and energy; although we plan and organize, participation, research, and action never seem to follow a straight path. This is a lesson that I am still learning today, but one that gave me the most trouble my first year in the program.

The tools I gained from my initial project are invaluable: communication, listening, sympathy, understanding, patience, flexibility, and most of all realizing that in the end, the work I do is not about me, but more so about the changes that take place for the people with whom I collaborate. As soon as I enter a neighborhood, the residents have a long list of characteristics they expect me to have, and beliefs about how my presence in their community is only to build a resume or write a paper. I have continually reminded myself and stressed to residents (through my actions) that it's not about me, but more so about us working together to meet our goals.

2001-02 Evaluation Results and Implications

First year's evaluation suggests some confusion between a service project and a research project. It also suggests a lack of connection between what the Fellows learn in the seminar and from the reading material, and what is happening in the community. The feeling was that these shortcomings result from confusing the different roles and tasks. Each Fellow essentially plays the roles of a learner, project manager, teacher, researcher, social being, individual stakeholder with particular aspirations, and an evaluator of his/her own work. Therefore, the focus during the fall '02 was on making each participant aware of these roles and tasks. Through the evaluation process, we explored with the Fellows the multiple roles and tasks that help them develop their project and their own learning. For example, as a learner, a stakeholder needs to assess what skills are needed and how to sharpen them. We were hoping to facilitate among the Fellows the awareness of their prior learning skills and outlooks to strengthen the skills that help them improve while revising the skills that limit their progress.

How the Fellows were balancing these roles and tasks formed the research question for the fall '02 semester. In addition to class participant observation, the Program

Evaluator, Nimat Hafez Barazangi, conducted a mid-semester survey questionnaire and end-of-the- semester role-play exercise.

Fall '02 Results in the words of the Graduate Research Assistance:

The Bartels Undergraduate Action Research Fellowship has worked thanks to the voluntary support an array of Cornell University faculty, staff, and undergraduate students. Through conversations with the Fellows, deconstructing their critical incident reports and observing the evolution of students' experiences several patterns in the way the Fellows have approached their projects and learned about participatory action research have come to the fore. The most telling patterns lie in the difficulties the Fellows have experienced.

Methods

Data generation was achieved through several methods, including participant observation, critical incident report and email exchanges, as well as one- on- one meetings with each Fellow. Observing and reflection on Fellows' body language, tone of voice, comments, answers, and what is not said in a given situation, when synthesized with background knowledge of each Fellows' project and insight from one- on- one meetings, offer clues to the Fellows' comfort with PAR ideology and methodology. By challenging students to analyze their projects the skills and critical reflection necessary for fruitful outcomes can be solidified.

Findings

The majority of Fellows had not been exposed to PAR prior to enrollment in the class. The incongruence between the fluidity of PAR and the linear form of traditional classes is a stumbling block for most Fellows. They were uneasy about the indeterminacy this method embraces.

Not only was it difficult for the Fellows to transcend traditional class format, but also traditional expectations and measures of success. The students admitted to the program are over achievers and are motivated to "succeed." Program leaders were often bombarded by questions relating to the grading scheme because the grading determination was carried out differently from the schemes used in conventional classes. Critical reflection was a significant component of the Bartels Fellowship and the PAR process, and cannot be measured as 'right' and 'wrong'.

Tools were offered to the students to ripen their reflections. However, the students, especially at the outset, were not able to comprehend the weight placed on an undefined exercise such as critical incident reports. Fellows also continued to compare themselves to their classmates despite the wide variance between the projects because they were trying to gauge their own 'success.' While it is a challenge to open up the students to the realization that they do not hold all of the answers, it is also an arduous task to explain that 'success' is a relative judgment. The Fellows compared themselves to their classmates rather than measuring their progress by their project's timeline and goals. Feeling 'behind' was an often-cited frustration.

The process of discovery ripens the environment for learning, but it is something the Fellows felt uncomfortable with. When the students ascertained where their needs lie, they could effectively shape their learning experience. But unease about the process's openness did lead Fellows to adopt methods that were not the most effective ones in a given situation. Worse still, and more frequently, the anxiety translated into inaction. The fear of 'failing' stalled action, again going back to the students' idea that they had to be experts before they could progress (showing how well socialized they already were to conventional academic

ideologies). Being in command of their decisions in the classroom was a unique circumstance for the Fellows and they were somewhat at a loss what to do with that amount of freedom.

Conclusions: The Model's Theoretical Evolution

In a nutshell, the model and the program seem to have evolved in the following manner:

1. The PAR service-learning working definition reads: A collaborative approach to individual and social inquiry, involving those most affected by a particular issue, as co-investigators, in a reciprocal-learning process designed to discover and implement workable solutions to critical problems affecting the quality of community life and the learners capacities to realize the different possibilities.

2. The PAR curriculum has transformed the traditional Factory Model into Social and individual Change.

3. PAR evaluation has moved from the traditional Plotted Efficiency model to Self-Evaluation model, wherein:

> **a.** A model means to train (a person) to a mode of knowing, problem solving, and evaluation.
> **b.** Social change-oriented model is a responsive & reflective approach to self-learning and self-evaluation.
> **c.** Evaluation is process-oriented investigation that validates, stimulates, directs, and underlines relations to realize possibilities.

For the Fellows to internalize the ethics of action research to the level of developing the moral courage to tell their collaborating organization that its own culture was standing in the way of progress, they still needed to cross some barriers that require more time to dismantle. In the course of the program, we observed that some of the Fellows have realized and/or have enabled their collaborators to realize that the solutions to the persistent problems in their community have to come from local knowledge and know-how, not from experts or from the application of some kind of "sure-fire technique". These results affirm that civic engagement does not start at the institutional level, but at the stakeholders' level. Yet, this PAR civic engagement process does not happen by merely providing a service, but by generating the skills needed for effective, reflective self-service. The strategy for the second year of the program, therefore, was to move with the Fellows to the level of meta-learning process so they could draw relations between the different roles and tasks and realize and discover their own learning and that of their community. The strategy for the third year of the program has been to press the Fellows to realize the centrality of self-evaluation to their own learning and change, as well as to learning and change among their community. Thus the program itself is always a work in progress and one in which each improvement brings with it new dilemmas and possibilities for further improvement.

forthcoming work with Cynthia Lee Andruske "Community-Service Learning and Sociology: A Student-Based E-Service for Building Bridges."

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