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Sharing Control: Developing Research Literacy through Community-Based Action Research

Erik Juergensmeyer

This article suggests that the methodology of community-based action research provides concrete strategies for fostering effective community problem solving. To argue for a community research pedagogy, the author draws upon past and present scholarship in action research and participatory action research, experiences teaching an undergraduate writing course revolving around action research, and conversations with community members who have benefitted from student research.

*The starting point for organizing the program
content of education or political action must
be the present, existential, concrete situation,
reflecting the aspirations of the people.*

—Paulo Freire

Though Freire's argument for community-based pedagogy has influenced numerous literacy scholars and service-learning practitioners, a disconnect still exists today. Significant texts such as *Building Partnerships for Service-Learning*, *Writing the Community: Concepts and Models for Service-learning in Composition* and *Community Literacy Programs and the Politics of Change* demonstrate how the town-and-gown separation is narrowing; however, the division still lingers. Fortunately, connections between community literacy and service learning evident in journals like *CLJ* and *The Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* provide concrete examples of progressive pedagogies and practices for both empowering communities and reshaping academe. Yet, is this enough? Popular polemics like Fish's *Save the World on Your Own Time* are gaining momentum and pushing us back by arguing for conservative approaches to higher education where canonized—and

inherently hierarchical—systems of knowledge dominate curriculum and constitute foundations of critical thinking.

Freire's focus on the participatory nature of research and the subsequent development of localized curricula, however, establishes a foundation for progressive pedagogies that can soften the tension and ultimately strengthen community-based work. An increased emphasis and focus on research methodologies, I argue, can help bridge the current divide. For the past several years, I have been developing a writing-based curriculum that seeks to strengthen community research through improving the basic methodologies available to student researchers. My work on community research develops a problem-solving model that is rooted in popular service-learning and action research pedagogies that provide concrete research methods capable of creating a more "practical application of rhetoric" (Griggs 225). By fostering a research literacy that empowers people to improve their communities and everyday lives, these methods encourage improved relationships between town and gown and establish researchers as change agents. For community members, these research strategies contribute to solving their problems; for students, they increase their capacities for both critical thinking and community participation.

Within service-learning and community research scholarship, problem-based methodologies offer successful pedagogies. Linda Flower's work on community dialogues demonstrates an especially relevant approach. The practical, hands-on approach Flower details in "Partners in Inquiry" creates environments where students and community members can mutually interact—where the logic of inquiry can freely exist through constructed spaces of shared collaborative inquiry. At these sites, faculty, students, and community representatives can either approach specific conflicts or examine general issues together (105). Their interactions encompass a "demanding literate practice" that is similar to the literate acts Flower describes in *The Construction of Negotiated Meaning*. These spaces, or "community problem-solving dialogues," help people investigate different issues relevant to their communities and needs. Flower explains,

A community problem-solving dialogue (CPSD) operates around a literal and metaphoric table, which can bring together students, faculty, community leaders and everyday people, as well as written knowledge of the academy and the oral wisdom of the neighborhood. ("Partners" 105)

The CPSD is thus designed to move toward "inquiry *with* the community" as opposed to *for* the community (106 [emphasis added]). Within these dialogues, people can look at specific problems by reframing them as open questions. For example, Flower explains how conversation

creates an entirely new opportunity for inquiry: “Consider, for example, an issue that reframes the topic of ‘gangs and urban violence’ by looking at its flip side and asking, what are the apparent possibilities for success, respect, and work for urban youth?” (105). Reframing a social situation as a research opportunity instead of a problem creates new occasions for invention, opportunities that can lead to relevant social changes. Within a dialogue based on community problems, diverse participants contribute ideas from their experiences; academics, teachers, students, youth, and community leaders can all participate in improving their social situations. By drawing on varied experiences, a CPSD creates an opportunity for collaboration and inquiry where the people at the table can focus on resolving pressing community problems.

Reflecting on my experiences as a community mediator who has created a variety of opportunities for dialogue within my community, I realize the importance of collaboration and the framing strategies that help both resolve conflict and create change. This has been especially prevalent in the work I have done implementing alternative justice programs in the local court system. Working with area judges and probationary employees, I created an opportunity for dialogue that re-contextualized minors’ first offenses through a series of victim impact panels and victim-offender dialogues. Within these dialogues, victims interact with people guilty of committing crimes similar to those they experienced in order to better demonstrate the wide-reaching impact of varied offenses, while at the same time allowing victims to express their experiences with the community. The two-hour long meetings, recommended (and attended) by judges overseeing minor offense cases, encourage offenders to reinterpret their actions as they have been experienced by people in their community. These discussions also encouraged victims to reinterpret their experiences as more than just victims processed through the judicial system but as real people with real stories and real experiences that can potentially help others make decisions. For example, in one dialogue, a store owner who had experienced vandalism and burglary shared her experiences with an individual who had performed similar acts to someone else. Watching the two discuss their experiences helped me better understand the sense of democratic “governance” argued for in Harry Boyte’s “Reframing Democracy: Governance, Civic Agency, and Politics.” Instead of ‘processing’ individuals through a system in which they have little ownership, we created a process that revolves around their experiences. From these dialogues, I have begun to better realize the significance of a broad participatory inquiry process.

This realization has helped me develop a more attuned understanding of contextualized inquiry and how to design curricula that honor the experiences of our communities. By conducting original research and seeing community issues as potential problems to be solved through

research, students can develop concrete strategies for framing and reframing community problems—a skill Flower argues is key to community problem-solving dialogues. Effective service-learning pedagogy frames students as researchers whose mission is to work with community members. The practical research strategies offered through action research have helped me design a pedagogy that empowers. They have helped me create adaptable research processes more appropriate to community problems.

Participatory Research as Vehicle for Change

Whereas action research has roots dating back to Alexander Bain's *Education as a Science* and John Dewey's *How We Think*, Martin Luther King Jr.'s presentation to the 1966 Conference on Social Change and the Role of Behavioral Sciences often marks a highpoint of this connection. King sought to strengthen the connection between academe and society by asking his audience to become more involved with the pressing issues of the time: "We ask you to make society's problems your laboratory. We ask you to translate your data into direction—direction for action" (Noffke). This call reflects a shift in thinking about research as an objective tool and increasing commitment among scholars to not only study social problems, but to see their academic work as a tool for addressing social problems.

Recent AR scholarship articulates a comprehensive research paradigm that improves the link between social action and social research. commonly, AR is defined as "a form of self-reflective problem solving which enables practitioners to better understand and solve pressing problems in social settings" (McKernan 6). Because the research process is both "conscious and deliberate," it enables research that utilizes hands-on inquiry and not simply habit or opinion (Tripp 159). The process generally follows a cyclical model of planning, acting, fact-finding, and analysis—a structure that welcomes contextual awareness and change. This recursive nature of the AR cycle enables reflection and problem solving by encouraging students to reflect on how all stages of their work affect their social environments, encouraging researchers to become more aware of their contexts. Such reflection takes on an especially practical and effective purpose when it seeks to empower individuals.

Because AR has a different goal from scientific research—not to gather data for intellectual, disciplinary growth, but to gather information that can be acted on—it suits community problem solving well. AR generates data that can help people change aspects of their environment or change practices that shape their environment. AR cycles, for example, allow students to both become critically aware of social problems like community injustices or lack of sustainability and to find ways to modify the systems that perpetuate such problems. Students can become more personally involved

with their research by examining issues that affect their own communities and sometimes their own lives, potentially developing an increased consciousness that empowers them to act socially. Participation in such a project can strengthen students' capacities for researching issues relevant to their lives and communities and increase their capacities for civic growth.

Complementing action research in the social sciences, participatory action research has greatly influenced and contributed to community work. Similar to AR, PAR is a recursive process that teaches researchers to always continue developing their work; however, different from traditional AR, researchers are often the primary stakeholders. PAR can simply be defined as an "action-oriented research activity in which ordinary people address common needs arising in their daily lives and, in the process, generate knowledge" (Park 83). On the institutional level, within community literacy dialogues especially, PAR principles are recognizable in Paulo Freire's work on liberatory education where individuals take on the responsibility for their own education and identify gaps specific to their literacy needs. As Freire suggests, education must be participatory for substantial social change to happen: once individuals are no longer recipients of others' approaches to education, they are more capable of identifying and acting on the social problems most relevant to their lives. Because community participation benefits us all, PAR's emphasis on participatory research places a concrete methodology in the hands of the citizens whose intimate awareness of community needs and local challenges can be most effective.

A contemporary example of PAR solving social problems can be seen in Kenneth Reardon's research with the East St. Louis community. Reardon identifies how service learning projects can create an "unequal partnership" between university and community, thus forwarding the "professional-expert model" (57) that Flower details so well, and offers action research as a means of developing concrete partnerships. He explains the potential for effective partnerships and solutions:

By actively involving residents in each step of the research process and soliciting residents' viewpoints regarding optimal solutions to local problems, researchers are more likely to identify strategies that will evoke broad-based citizen support as well as official endorsement. This increases the potential for implementation of recommendations emerging from these research efforts. By sharing control over the research process with local residents, action researchers begin to overcome the distance established by previous campus-controlled community work. (59)

To Reardon, successful projects produce positive results while at the same time reestablish the relationship between town and gown. By including participant input, such community-based data collection enables more successful research and action.

An excellent place to see this happen can be seen through the success experienced with the East St. Louis Farmers' Market. This collaborative action research project paired university students from a variety of disciplines with community residents in order to brainstorm ways to improve a community plagued with crime, violence, and unemployment (Reardon 60). After conducting numerous surveys within the community and fieldwork branching off to other Midwestern cities, the researchers suggested establishing a locally owned farmers' market that could provide the community more of a center; local, healthy food options; and employment opportunities. (The market's success is documented at <http://www.llife.org/farmersmarket.htm>). Student and community researchers work together to examine how to best utilize local resources and better serve the community. In addition, by following iterative research processes and collecting their own data, students become more connected to their communities and the significant challenges they face, providing lessons in practical research strategies that apply beyond the classroom.

The 'Accidental' Nature of AR

[T]his discovery indeed is almost of that kind I call serendipity, a very expressive word [...] I shall endeavor to explain to you [...] I once read a silly fairy tale called The Three Princes of Serendip: as their highnesses traveled, they were always making discoveries, by accident of sagacity, of things which they were not in quest of.
—Horace Walpole

Because of the above explanation in his 1754 letter to Horace Mann, Horace Walpole is credited for the first (English) use of the word "serendipity." However, the fairy tale he references, the Persian-originated *The Three Princes*, is often credited for documenting the important lesson. In the tale, the King sends his sons on a journey to become astute and worthy of the throne. What they experience is not traditional tutelage of learned minds but the problems experienced by common folk and the many valuable lessons associated with their solutions. The Princes ultimately gain such valuable knowledge that they are sought after by Kings beyond their own. Their "accidental sagacity" reminds us to create opportunities for such chance encounters (Lederach 114).

AR, because of its emphasis on both theory and practice, creates opportunities for accidental learning. Such situations benefit a curriculum

that provides strategies for inquiry and a process that allows accidental discovery. AR in the classroom does just this. It provides a clear structure that allows for problem solving, collaboration, and genuine inquiry.

Basically, AR curriculum follows a five-step process to enable this learning:

- Ask a question, identify a problem, define an area of exploration
 - Decide what data should be collected, how they should be collected, and how often
 - Collect and analyze data
 - Describe how findings can be used and applied
 - Report and share findings and plan for action with others.
- (Johnson)

This simple process provides an organized curriculum that guides students through their research. Whereas this method is often visualized as a series of circles overlapping each other within action research scholarship, I find a linear representation sufficient. As researchers reflect on each stage, they revisit the original research questions and modify their plans as their work evolves.

All of the steps are crucial to the research process; however, the second and third are the most beneficial to the type of community work that can be accomplished within a traditional academic semester. Naturally, data collection and analysis have always been significant components of community research; however, student researchers are sometimes challenged by limited means of data collection; their past experiences are often confined to traditional library research and their fieldwork is generally limited to interviews and surveys. Because AR provides a variety of data collection and analysis instruments, students are more capable of conducting contextual research that can respond to the local needs of community partners. As student researchers plan and decide what data should be collected, they can choose from a variety of data collection instruments that provide a wide range of opportunities. In my classes, I provide students a series of instruments adapted from Andrew Johnson's *A Short Guide to Action Research*:

- Logs or Research Journals
- Field Notes and Observations (thick description, quick notes during, reflections)
- Checklists
- Conferences and Interviews
- Video and Audiotapes
- Data Retrieval Charts (visual organizers used to help collect and organize)
- Rating Checklists (simple ways to collect quantitative data)
- Products or Performances

- Surveys (closed response and open-ended questions)
- The Arts (analyzing different artifacts for relevant information)
- Archival Data (websites, class journals, emails)

These varied data types and collection instruments enable students to develop a broad view of potential solutions, which sets their work apart from existing a-contextual research and helps them establish roles as innovative researchers and participants.

Importantly, such a broad awareness helps develop understandings of research beyond mere triangulation. Looking at a topic from as many angles as possible is not only a significant research strategy, but it is also a key for students' critical thinking. Understanding the importance of multiple viewpoints usually marks a shift in student researchers' work as they learn to move beyond the "pseudo science" that tends to support their hunches or create data that says what they want to say. Too often do student researchers limit themselves to the most expedient data: they collect information from convenient databases, limiting the scope of their work.

Accompanying these broad data collection strategies are a variety of helpful analytical techniques. As we know, researchers need to look at the variety of data they have collected and organize their findings in meaningful ways. Similar to the framing strategies of community-problem solving dialogues, data analysis introduces students to coding and categorization heuristics that make order out of primary qualitative evidence. Instead of employing mathematical strategies for analyzing generally quantitative data, action research students experience analysis as a process of looking at and learning from the data they have collected. Analysis is sometimes synonymous with interpretation, where students learn "a process of reflection and interpretation, providing participants and other stake-holding audiences with new ways of thinking about the issues and events investigated" (Stringer 95). Researchers inductively look over their data and attempt to identify repeated patterns and recurring themes through strategies like first and second-order analysis (Thomas), epiphany identification (Stringer), and graphical representation (Hendricks). These holistic approaches to analysis do not seek to identify correlation coefficients but instead identify key concepts within data.

Community-Based Action Research

A relevant application of the student-research-oriented approach to action research can be found in Ernest Stringer's *Action Research* (currently in its 3rd edition). Stringer draws on various research methods to foster communal action. Naturally, Stringer's definition of action research parallels others, but his especially focuses on agency: "Action research is a collaborative approach to *inquiry* or *investigation* that provides people with the means to

take systematic *action* to resolve specific problems” (8). Stringer espouses research that, in order to be effective, must consider “the social, cultural, interactional, and emotional factors that affect all human activity” (9). He stresses the importance of community-based work by drawing on the “dialogic, hermeneutic (meaning-making) approach to evaluation” found in fourth-generation evaluation approaches of E.G. Guba and Y. S. Lincoln (10). This approach is especially applicable as it serves as the “ideological basis for community-based action research,” a “more democratic, empowering, and humanizing approach to inquiry” (10). So, what we get is a form of collaborative inquiry where researchers do not attempt to remain objective in order to remain neutral but participate to the best of their ability and become stakeholders. Even though the participatory approach may be shunned by traditional researchers seeking less bias, the type of collective inquiry that Stringer waxes toward results “not only in a collective vision but also in a sense of community” (11).

Building upon Stringer’s community-oriented approach, I have developed an AR curriculum at a small public liberal arts college in the Southwest. “Composition 253: Action Research” offers students opportunities to create AR projects in lieu of taking a traditional academic research courses .Composition 253 offers a formal methodology for students to gain important skills that reach beyond our classroom. In addition, as it is connected to the College’s “Community-Based Learning and Research” (CBLR) program, it offers students first-hand experiences of how their work can make a difference. Simply put, the pedagogy “exposes students to the complex issues and needs of the larger society, engages them in addressing those needs through a variety of actions and problem solving strategies, and links classroom learning with the conditions and contexts of the real world” (CBLR par. 1). As students become involved in field working and participatory design, they became interested in learning how academic research and writing increase their agency. Through grassroots problem solving, they learn how to design research projects that work for and with stakeholders.

While originally designing this course, I sought to develop an atmosphere where students engaged with community partners and created ways to participate in community problem-solving dialogues. Couched under the theme of community conflict resolution, this first design asked students to investigate community topics that especially interest them while developing concrete plans that could be publicly disseminated. After identifying specific research interests, students organized into groups covering several topics: education, land use and development, marketing and research, and area water issues. During the course of the semester, students investigated existing research, created and tested data collection instruments, member checked with community partners, collected data, and

generated formal reports detailing their work and identifying suggestions for change. Ultimately they presented their findings through a community forum—the “CBLR Showcase”—sponsored by the College and attended by students, faculty, and community partners.

While the groups’ accomplishments were well received by the community, students faced many challenges throughout the semester. Perhaps the largest challenge came from the confines of the academic semester. As can be an issue in service-learning pedagogy and practice, an academic semester limits the scope of many projects and can overwhelm students by the amount of classroom and community work required, combined with public dissemination of their work and the close ties of our community, students—on more than one occasion—described the pressures felt as their projects were due. In addition, some students found it challenging to modify their schedules to conduct field research. The course allotted two weeks for field research, but some students found themselves too caught up in their weekly routines on campus to modify their commuting schedules and missed opportunities to work with community partners. Such limitations are inevitable, but proper foresight, careful planning, and constant communication can successfully lessen some of the challenges.

The following academic year, I continued developing partnerships and identified a community organization that could benefit from working with action research students. Braided River Mediation Center, a fledgling community mediation center in Durango, was especially in need of problem-solving research. Because of my personal and professional interests in restorative justice and conflict resolution, I have stayed in contact with Braided River over the years and attempted to support its resurgence. Having served on the Board of Directors at one point, I became familiar enough with the organization that I was able to field general questions regarding the organization’s goals and challenges, which has come in handy in the classroom as I have attempted to foster a connection between students and the organization.

For the first semester of the partnership, Braided River representatives, accompanied by executive director Susie Bonds, visited the class to provide a general introduction to and background on the organization. This conversation illuminated several distinct challenges that the organization faced and led to a more involved discussion where student groups met with Ms. Bonds and brainstormed potential challenges and problems they found relevant. During this time, Braided River representatives joined the discussions and answered questions, providing more information. After these discussions, students identified and divided themselves into several research groups to help solve some of the challenges they identified:

- Marketing challenges

- Financial challenges
- Broadening community involvement
- Broadening involvement with area schools

Students ultimately provided a great deal of information: they created a word-of-mouth campaign, informational literature, and press releases; they solicited donations from area banks and philanthropists, and collected data and information regarding grant opportunities; they articulated a strategy for the organization to address specific community issues like recycling, water fluoridation, and sustainable food production; and they worked with area school administrators on identifying the role of conflict resolution in K-12 schools. Fortunately, all of these projects contributed to BRMC's renewal campaign—especially the first two, which provided instant relief. Identifying affordable ways for the non-profit to communicate with the public created a series of materials to help get the word out for the organization.

The following semester, after BRMC secured increased funding and community support, another section of action research students also aligned with Braided River's presentation, and a majority also voluntarily chose to focus on several challenges:

The potential connection between mediation skills and area wilderness experience programs

- The opportunity for peer mediation in area high schools
- The possibility of BRMC-sponsored Victim Impact Panels
- The possibility of BRMC-sponsored Victim Offender Mediation

While data collected from all of these projects was useful, the third project was the most beneficial, as BRMC established an agreement with the area courts to offer Victim Impact Panels (discussed earlier) soon after the students submitted their projects. Student research on restorative justice, community members' experiences with the court system, and gaps in services offered by the County helped the organization help the community.

Such success stems from the similarities between alternative justice and CBAR. Participatory research is especially fitting to restorative justice as they both empower individuals to create opportunities for negotiating differences. This idea is not new; however, as Ernest Stringer identifies the connection between negotiation and community research:

Community-based action research seeks to change the social and personal dynamics of the research situation so that the research process enhances the lives of all those who participate. It is a collaborative approach to inquiry that seeks to build positive working relationships and productive communicative styles. Its intent is to provide a climate that enables disparate groups of people to work harmoniously and productively to

achieve a set of goals. It is fundamentally a consensual approach to inquiry and works from the assumption that cooperation and consensus should be the primary orientation of research activity. (20-1)

This process has been especially relevant to Susie Bonds, longtime volunteer for BRMC. She credits the students' projects as being vital to the organization's success during its renewal campaign.

Reflecting on the past projects, Bonds identifies the energetic climate and cooperation from students: "Not only were the students interested and willing to research new outlets for promoting restorative justice and Braided River, they were eager to meet outside the classroom for further education. They developed strategic marketing plans, were actively involved in community projects and successful with obtaining monetary donations. For me, working with the students is extremely energizing [and] something I look forward to yearly" (email). She especially recalls one semester where students were problem-solving the organization's lack of community awareness and suggested she participate in a community event. At the first annual Durango Peace Day, action research students helped her set up and manage a booth where they worked at soliciting public support: "With Braided River's booth at peace day, we did something we would have never done before. The idea of simply setting up a table and having people sign the volunteer sheet would have never struck me. I especially remember the students' passion as they went around recruiting. It was contagious." As a result of that day, BRMC collected a list of interested community volunteer mediators and novices interested in mediator training, providing data to justify a larger emphasis on mediation and justifying an increased caseload from the county court system. Whereas a number of factors influenced BRMC's success, the information and reports created by students and their research directly helped the organization address some of its more direct problems.

Conclusion

In "Is Action Research Really Relevant?" philosopher Stephen Toulmin examines the critical reception of action research by certain disciplines. He locates questions regarding the legitimacy of action research methodology to the age-old Plato/Aristotle divide:

The case of action research drives a wedge between two opposite views of research methodology: an 'exclusive' (Platonic/theoretical) one which insists that only objective and quantitative inquires (as in physics) are genuine scientific

research, and an ‘inclusive’ (Aristotelian/practical) one that recognizes a need to adapt the research methods of different inquiries to the nature of their problems. (51)

For Toulmin, this divide exists because various disciplines attempt to monopolize on research methodology, an error he associates with an overemphasis on ‘Newtonian Physics.’ Any informed ‘Aristotelian methodologist’, he asserts, knows the importance of the adaptation and contextualization of our research methodologies; however, it is not ignorance that is preventing action research from making a name for itself. Toulmin—similar to Freire—knows the importance of framing research as a *democratic* process. Change from within can only happen if institutions function in such a way that reform comes easily and participants have the power and skills to create it (60).

As my work on action research progresses, I am fortunate to be in a community invested in capacity building. During the current academic semester, for example, the work of Composition 253 students was brought up in a community conversation by someone who attended last semester’s CBLR Showcase. Consequently, I have been approached by a substantial local sustainability initiative in the hopes of collaborating *with* them, contributing problem-solving and, most importantly, research. At the heart of this project is a mission to develop a form of community asset mapping that establishes a foundation for increasing the public’s awareness of community sustainability resources. Current sections of Composition 253 (we have doubled the number of sections we usually offer and have faculty members interested in the pedagogy) are eager to participate in such an initiative. Even though I have lined up several guest speakers to present different community problems to students, the class seems to have already made up their mind to work with the community sustainability project. Their initial projects on the challenges of clean water in a mining community, the lack of disability services, the environmental advantages of “green building,” human-bear conflict, and the role of agricultural sustainability fit perfectly in the realm of community asset mapping and increasing our community’s capacity for building a more sustainable future, so we are currently proceeding with the project—how serendipitous.

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