

Community-Based Research as Scientific and Civic Pedagogy

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My pedagogical efforts over the years have focused on two key challenges I have faced in mentoring undergraduates:

1. How do I help undergraduates discover the thrill and value of social scientific research?
2. How do I help undergraduates connect meaningfully with their communities and become active and responsible citizens?

Community-based research (CBR) has become the means I employ to overcome these challenges.

How do I connect research methods instruction with real questions that captivate students' interests? Novices often feel overwhelmed by details of methodological mechanics and miss the point that methods are just tools for exploring fascinating questions. Instructors in social scientific research methods courses typically try to overcome this challenge by encouraging students to define research questions and hypotheses relating to students' experiences. While some of these studies are entertaining, to students they still often feel similar to the typical "canned" learning experiences that go no further than the professor and, after receiving a grade, are relegated to the "circular file."

The undergraduate research movement has heeded this call for more meaningful engagement of undergraduates in the research process. Working with close faculty mentoring, students engage in *real* research projects, sometimes of their own design and other times as an apprentice in the faculty mentor's research. Students working in such rich undergraduate

research programs benefit as much from involvement in real research as from close faculty mentoring and disciplinary socialization.

But at the same time, I am increasingly concerned about contemporary undergraduate students' civic apathy and disconnection from the "outside" world. Undergraduate students' struggles with finding meaning in the research process seem to be symptomatic of a bigger disconnect between personal action and understanding how action can make a difference. Moreover, many youths who are privileged to attend college are dissociated from individuals whose opportunities have been overtly limited by social injustices. This dissociation is often further reinforced by the rigid boundaries of time (e.g., an eighty-minute class period, a fourteen-week semester) and space (e.g., rows of chairs in a classroom, the protected walls separating a college or university from area neighborhoods) that structure learning in higher education. Undergraduate education needs to focus as much on providing exposure to and fostering civic awareness as on helping students learn knowledge and skills that will allow them to make a difference.

Certainly, the burgeoning service-learning movement in higher education has been an answer to this call for facilitating students' connection with the *real* world. Students have been sent to community locations nationwide to provide direct service and extend a helping hand. But students are infrequently given opportunities to use new higher-order academic skills in these experiences, and because they are typically unaccompanied by

faculty, they miss the benefit of direct faculty role-modeling and engagement.

How can the best of the undergraduate research and service-learning movements be united so that their respective strengths compensate for their weaknesses? Community-based research answers this challenge by engaging undergraduate students in a collaborative partnership to work on real research that will make a difference for local communities. Students are socialized as *public scholars*, learning actively about the research process and about how empirical inquiry can be applied to real social issues.

Community-Based Research

Community-based research is collaborative inquiry that is dedicated primarily to serving the research or information needs of community organizations. The CBR community-campus partnership includes representatives of the community organization, students, and faculty. These partners work together to address a community organization's need to study itself (e.g., to evaluate a program), or to gather information necessary for organizational or program development (e.g., a community needs/assets assessment).

CBR is public scholarship—rigorous research as a form of service to the public good. Community organizations aim to provide services for target populations. To ensure that limited resources are used as effectively as possible and to compete for increasingly limited funding resources, community organizations must study the needs and assets of their target population and the effectiveness of their programs and

services. Yet community practitioners typically lack training in research, and therefore are at a disadvantage as they seek to sustain their organization.

The expectation in CBR is that all partners will bring some skills and expertise to the partnership and all partners will learn from the collaborative experience—all partners are both teachers and learners. Community partners are professionals who are experts in working with the target community and with the issues at the heart of their agency's mission. They are experts in nonprofit management, fundraising, and navigating the political terrain. Campus partners bring knowledge of research design and methodology, time and energy for study implementation, and skill in data analysis and presentation. They may also bring connections with relevant theory and basic and applied research. By the conclusion of the partnership, community partners have developed research acumen that will be of continued benefit to organizational development. Campus partners have developed deeper understanding of social justice, of the nonprofit sector, of the applied value of research, and often of the social policy implications of their work.

Social power imbalances, role expectations, and stereotypes make achieving balance, equality, and mutuality in the community-based research partnership a key challenge. Public notions of professors keep faculty at a respectable distance: they are stereotyped as too high-brow to associate with commoners; their work is construed as esoteric and far above ground-level concerns. Many community partners are used to “ivory

tower” academics sending their research assistants down to the streets to study them, or sending their students to serve the needy. CBR counters these stereotypes by defining faculty partners as equal to student and community partners. The faculty partner needs to have sensitivity to these stereotypes, and must help establish working relationships based on shared roles and shared respect. Undergraduates can be pivotal partners in achieving this balance. The explicit role of students as learners facilitates the community partner's role as expert and teacher, helping community partners to feel more equal as both “giver” and “taker” in the partnership. Admittedly, this challenges the traditional roles and habits of many faculty members. As with other forms of undergraduate research, attention is needed to how these powerful teacher-scholar activities are regarded and supported in definitions of faculty roles and rewards.

Fusing Undergraduate Research and Community Engagement

Through the Trenton Youth Community-Based Research Corps (TYCRC) at the College of New Jersey, I have integrated undergraduate research and community engagement. TYCRC developed out of my interest in engaging undergraduate students in research that would make a difference in the lives of children living in poverty in Trenton, New Jersey, a neighboring city to our suburban campus. We partner with nonprofit social service agencies that otherwise lack the resources to hire external researchers to evaluate their programs. Yet such research is increasingly

necessary for their economic survival, not to mention for developing maximally effective programs and services.

Initially, TYCRC was a one-semester course in community-based research methods in which students completed a small demonstration research project. This was a familiar model that comfortably allowed me to experiment with engaging undergraduates in CBR. We quickly gained appreciation for how engaging the research was to all involved, and how complex the learning experience was, extending deeply into but also far beyond research methods. Moreover, given the challenges of working in a real-world setting with professionals who follow a standard calendar rather than an academic calendar, I quickly realized the necessity of extending the program beyond a semester. The periodicity of a semester constrains learning to particular times (and typically to particular contexts) and is mismatched with the real-time nature of CBR. (Of course, that also led me to question the artificial compartmentalization of other undergraduate research projects and appreciate a more natural developmental process.)

TYCRC is now a three-semester program. Students first enroll in a course entitled *Downtown: Inner-City Youth and Families*. This course grew out of lessons learned about preparation needed to support students in engaging meaningfully in intense urban CBR projects. The majority of students involved in TYCRC have had little to no exposure to the realities of inner-city children and families living in poverty. Initial exposure to these realities and awareness of the mission and strategies of community

organizations is necessary for preparing the students for the CBR partnership.

Downtown: Inner-City Youth and Families is a “course within a course”—a community course within a college course. Students enrolled in *Downtown* also take the Trenton Community Orientation Course, an eight-session program fostering youth advocacy skills in concerned citizens. Other participants are typically adult social service professionals, retired citizens interested in finding volunteer opportunities, or philanthropists wanting to learn more about Trenton’s needs and assets. Each session focuses on a different issue (e.g., child abuse and neglect, education) and meets at a local social service agency. TYCRC students learn firsthand about pressing inner-city issues; they get to know many Trenton citizens; they learn through observation, interaction, and testimonials about Trenton youth and families; they learn about numerous social service agencies, including the economic pressures they face; and they develop familiarity with and comfort in traveling to Trenton. These community sessions are complemented by class sessions at the college that include reflection, relevant social science readings, and discussion with area professionals about the role of research in social service agencies.

TYCRC students then enter yearlong CBR partnerships in which they accomplish major research projects with and on behalf of their community partners. Three students work on each CBR project; this small-team approach encourages collaboration among students while also providing manageability in terms of project organization and communication. Students are assigned to CBR

teams based on their interests and work habits. I establish the initial partnership with the community organizations and have preliminary conversations about their research needs. Students join the partnership, and then the mutual work of defining and executing the CBR project begins.

We start by discussing and defining the agency’s research needs. We discuss at length what research aims will provide the most useful information to the agency. The students and faculty spend time getting to know the agency by holding all meetings there, and students volunteer time to help at the agency. The students, with input from other partners, conduct professional literature searches to further inform the research questions.

Once the objectives of the research are clearly defined, a realistic research design is defined, measures and data-collection methods are designed, and study implementation logistics are planned. Research ethics are reviewed by the Institutional Review Board of either the community organization (if available) or college. Students are instrumental in administering the data-collection process, and they take the lead in statistical analysis and the presentation of results. The full partnership participates in discussing and interpreting results, and in developing recommendations for the agency based on the results. When appropriate, focus groups are held with clients of the agency to gain their perspectives on the results and implications for the agency. The agency defines the most useful format for reporting study results. Typically, agencies request a formal research report (this is particularly helpful

in seeking grant funding) as well as a presentation for agency staff, the board of directors, and sometimes clientele. Students are the primary authors on the research report, with substantial input on multiple drafts from all partners.

I stimulate partnerships with community organizations by maintaining active involvement in various stakeholder groups in Trenton and engaging in conversation with agencies about research needs. Like any relationship, a CBR partnership must be nurtured. Sometimes a CBR partnership grows out of weeks of conversation; other times the organization is not yet ready for a CBR partnership but benefits from learning about potential collaborative projects and discussing strategies for developing readiness. In developing a CBR partnership, it is important to have open conversations about how this approach to research differs from other approaches (e.g., hiring an outside evaluation consultant). Making guiding principles explicit, maintaining open communication, and addressing partnership challenges promptly will ensure a productive CBR partnership.

Powerful Learning Experiences

I am continually awed by the commitment and motivation of TYCRC students. These students are also awed by the power of their learning experience, the quality of the final CBR report, and the significance of their work. However, the CBR partnership experience is a challenge for students. Students' traditional expectations of learning "rules and regulations" are exploded. The partner-

ship defines the work plan. Working on a real-life project requires flexibility and adaptability. Students must step up as equal partners, exercising both leadership and collaboration skills. In the course of the project, students become experts in the CBR project's area of focus. When interpreting results and developing recommendations, students must learn to use that expertise thoughtfully and responsibly. Students must develop their communication, problem-solving, project organization, and professional writing skills. They discover writing as a collaborative process, including editing and revision. They experience research as a helpful tool, and they are confronted with the realities of conducting research and making practical choices. The CBR experience is especially thought-provoking for students who have also had experience with more basic disciplinary undergraduate research; these students provoke excellent conversation about philosophies of science and the ramifications of different research design and method choices. Students learn about real-life organizational dynamics, often in a dramatic firsthand way, and they learn through close-up observation and interaction about social injustices and the politics of social service provision.

Community agency partners have used CBR project results to gain additional grant funding, to expand services to reach new populations, and to further develop programs to increase their effectiveness. Students who have completed the TYCRC program have advanced to employment in area nonprofit community organizations and social policy research institutes, and

gained admittance to graduate programs in public health, medicine, social work, public policy, law, counseling psychology, and developmental psychology. And I am motivated by the role of "public teacher-scholar" catalyzed by my involvement in CBR partnerships. CBR presents a unique opportunity to weave together my professional roles as teacher, scholar, and citizen in a most rewarding way.

Community-based research engages undergraduate students, community agents, and faculty alike in social scientific inquiry as a powerful tool for social change. All partners grow as researchers and effective citizens. And in the process, stereotypes are challenged, divides are bridged, a bigger sense of community is forged, and "making a difference" becomes a way of life. As one former TYCRC member reflects,

CBR taught me that research could directly influence people's lives. And my CBR experience has helped me to develop a greater sense of personal responsibility for making positive changes within the community. I have always believed that research is important, but I only thought that research was geared toward proving hypotheses. Community-based research illustrated to me that research can help a community. My CBR experience has strengthened my belief that although no single individual can ignite major changes by themselves, many passionate individuals are necessary to organize a cooperative effort to make positive changes within the community. ■