



## Participatory Action in Research: Making Outreach Central

Richard A. Couto  
Professor of Leadership Studies  
University of Richmond

Community-based, problem-centered pedagogy implies criticism of higher education. Ernest L. Boyer made this criticism explicit in his calls to reconsider scholarship; to fashion the New American College; and to shape a scholarship of engagement (Boyer 1990; 1994; 1996). Donald Schon (1995) probed Boyer's work for the fundamental challenges it presents for research and teaching on college and university campuses. After explaining my initial involvement in community-based, problem-centered pedagogies, I would like to share some lessons about participatory action research. PAR moves service learning to the center of the universities' heart of teaching, research, and service. It can get there only by a frank assessment of the challenges this work presents as well as advice and encouragement for its conduct.

I became involved in public service and outreach as part of the student movement that sought and demanded an earlier form of engagement in higher education. I served as co-director and director of the Center for Health Services at Vanderbilt University from 1975 to 1988. The center had its roots in the student protests of the early 1970s. One of the institutional job criteria — part of the job description that I had — was *anger*. The health center had a remarkable, perhaps unparalleled, record of concrete achievement for the education and training of students and of community development in low-income communities (Couto 1982). The programs were not without their problems and limitations; yet, they also effectively combined community development and interdisciplinary, community-based, problem-centered pedagogies.

On campus, however, community-based programs did not dent the curriculum. First, they served primarily as an escape valve for student protestors who might otherwise disrupt standard operating procedures and, later, as a token for students who criticized their course work for its lack of immediate social relevance. As student protest turned to community service, the curriculum remained impregnable. The presidents of Campus Compact — the collective of colleges and universities committed to the service-learning pedagogy — murmured about a recalcitrant faculty and decided not to spend

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their political capital on campus to get community service into the curriculum. Student leaders of Campus Outreach and Opportunity League, or COOL, continued to shun the curriculum for fear of its negative influence on COOL's work.

However, just a few years later, in spring 1992, Campus

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Compact and COOL had evolved in their promotion of community service to a point where each organization understood that its next developmental step involved integrating community service into the curriculum. As they reached this conclusion at their first joint meeting, I was teaching at the University of Richmond, drawn by the opportunity to serve on the first faculty of the Jepson School of Leadership Studies and — finally — to integrate community service into the curriculum.

The Jepson curriculum touts its internship and service-learning requirement (Couto 1993). Students endorse both elements of the curriculum in their evaluations every semester; class surveys were conducted in 1994, our first year, and in 1999. Some students also

endorse community-based, problem-centered pedagogies and research by conducting it themselves as independent studies or senior projects.

I, like the rest of the faculty, have used participatory action research in my classes. I view this as the form of service learning with the greatest possibility for integration in the classroom and the curriculum. I have seen its power in teaching students and for community development. Student-community partnerships have created a community cannery, a respite center for caregivers of HIV-positive patients, valuable evaluative reports, a newspaper written and sold by the homeless, a citizen advisory council for the Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court, and many more developments. Boyer gave this action research a name, scholarship of engagement (Boyer 1990; 1994; 1996).

At one level, the scholarship of engagement means connecting the rich resources of the university to our most pressing social, civic, and ethical problems — to our children, to our schools, to our teachers, and to our cities. Campuses would be viewed by both students and professors not as isolated islands, but “as staging grounds for action” (Boyer 1996, p. 19).

Fortunately, this scholarship of engagement, in the form of action research, seems to be spreading just as community service

and service learning is catching on. Examples of scholarly work in this area include the lessons of Campus Compact's seven small participatory action research grants (Campus Compact 1994), and *The Chronicle of Higher Education's* survey of several community-based (Cordes 1998) research efforts, which focused on the Policy Research Action Group of four Chicago-area universities. Other programs, such as PRAG, the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Community Partnerships, the Loka Institute, and the Highlander Research and Education Center seemed to form a critical mass.

Naturally, Boyer did not intend second-class status for the scholarship of engagement. It is a scholarship of application: "serious, demanding work, requiring the rigor — and the accountability — traditionally associated with research activities" (Boyer 1990, p. 22). Practice has led to exacting canons for PAR (Argyris et. al. 1985; Couto 1996; Reason 1994). Boyer, however, did not touch upon the central reason for serious and demanding work in community-based, problem-centered research: the stakes are real, not academic. PAR studies find their way into proposals, legislative hearings, newspaper accounts, and court cases.

Donald Schon, known in experiential education for his concept

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of reflective-practitioner, alludes to only part of the controversy sparked by PAR. He argues that the scholarship of application implies "a kind of action research with norms of its own, which will conflict with the norms of technical rationality — the prevailing epistemology built into the research universities" (Schon 1995, p. 27). Schon asserts that academicians must make a choice between rigor or relevance — dry highlands or swampy lowlands.

"In the varied topography of knowledge, a high ground overlooks a swamp. On the high ground, manageable problems lend themselves to solutions through the use of research-based theory and technique. In the swamp-covered lowlands, problems are messy and confusing and resistant to technical

solution. The problems of the high ground tend to be relatively unimportant to individuals or to society at large, however great their technical interest may be, while in the swamp lie the problems of greatest human concern. The practitioner is confronted with a choice. Shall she remain on the high ground where she can solve relatively unimportant problems according to her standards of rigor, or shall she descend to the swamp of important problems where she cannot

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be rigorous, in any way she knows how to describe" (Schon 1995, p. 28)?

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Schon overstates the dilemma of "swamp scholarship" and thereby overlooks a more difficult conundrum. Swamp scholars have to find new standards for rigor: relevance is not enough. If the problems are truly important and imply political and social action, research about them must be credible. Like it or not, credibility comes from grounding swamp scholarship in the firm footing of some academic discipline(s). Swamp scholars have to find a way to describe the rigor of their relevance. It is precisely scholarly rigor, even PAR, that makes our community-based, problem-centered research relevant and uniquely useful to

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community partners. The real dilemma, not apparent in Schon's reflection, is to reach rigor *and* relevance. Like Ginger Rogers, however, we have to dance with academia's Fred Astaire — in high heels and backwards. Swamp scholars can't tango while other scholars waltz; we must waltz well, with rigor. Unlike Ginger Rogers, however, we can insist on new music: relevance. We can do so by relating community-based methods to the rigor of other disciplines. Figure 1 attempts to do this. It starts from field work, a method common to most studies, and moves up through two steps to participatory action research.

This critique of Schon's dilemma underscores his central point: sooner or later, community-based, problem-centered scholarship — teaching and research — reaches a point at which our campuses cannot hide the gap between its stated goals and its practice. It cannot incorporate the goal of scholarship if all but one form of scholarship is practiced. It cannot embrace the goal of service to society if scholarship continually takes students and faculty further from information that relates directly to social improvement. Adaptive work required today is not merely to get institutions to change. It involves showing scholars how relevant research can be conducted rigorously.

Combining relevance and rigor is not easy. PAR is no more a silver bullet than was service-learning. If either is to be effective, each requires time — consuming and intensive work. If we are not willing to commit to this level of work, we cannot display rigor and relevance nor model the changes we are asking our institutions to undertake.

Colleen Cordes' survey of community-based research projects was reported in the *Chronicle* (Cordes 1998), while I was in the middle of a difficult PAR project about which I had a thick set of reservations. Officials with the Richmond Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court asked if I would conduct a report on

**Figure One**  
**Taxonomy of Research Methods**  
**and Community Involvement and Change**

**Methods**

Participatory Action Research

Action Research

Community-Based Research

Field Work

Disciplinary focus. Research about people of a community. No social change is proposed unless through advocacy.

Disciplinary methods applied in innovative manner. Research about and with people of a community. General appeal for social change.

Disciplinary methods applied in innovative manner. Research with and for people of a community. Specific issues of social change.

Disciplinary methods borrowed. Emphasis on adapting methods and new paradigms. Research with, for, and by people in a community. Specific issue of social change and general goal of empowerment and social justice.

Fewest      Degrees of Community Involvement and Social Change      Most

juvenile offenders and at-risk children and their families whom the court serves. I agreed to do so on the condition that I conduct a complementary participatory action research project with my two critical-thinking classes.

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There is much to recommend the 140-page study and its process.

- Students designed the focus areas of the study.
- We acquired access to detained juveniles and devised a method to include them as researchers in the project rather than merely research subjects.
- Legal professionals and children's advocates praised the report.
- Faculty and other resource people participated outside of class time — in the city jail, weekly coordinating meetings, drafting sessions, etc. These are critical to increased and improved learning outcomes (Astin 1993).

Negative aspects of the project included:

- Students engaged in a real-life research project — however, their experience occurred in the swampy lowlands.
- The topic required more focus; it was too broad to be addressed in one semester. Elements included child development, the unique juvenile court system, and the differences class and race make on the life chances of students and juveniles with whom they worked.
- The project's size also compounded the logistical problems of coordination.
- Students had to work hard, rued the day they entered my class, and expressed their dissatisfaction in my teaching evaluations.
- The project was time-consuming — even after its completion. Four months and two revisions after the end of the semester, we finally finished the required report of the project's outcome.

But each yin has its own yang.

- Students continued to work on the program after semester end.
- Two of the eleven groups produced work ready to incorporate into the report.
- Today, class alumni correspondence describes experiences that validate the process of the study, which many severely criticized at the time.
- I uncovered important principles of good practice for future projects: working with community partners to establish a specific focus and assigning students face-to-face encounters with clients for evaluative purposes.

I recognize critically important elements were missing from the study, related to the best practices of community-based, problem-centered teaching and research. First, students need a thorough

orientation; you never get a second chance to shape their first impressions. Second, the project should be grand enough to stimulate the imagination with a sense of importance but limited to bring to closure in a semester with reasonable effort.

Size and scope apart, several questions remain unanswered.

- How do you motivate students in a required class to take on the effort and diligence that such research requires when they have not chosen the work?
- How do you produce a credible report, and how do students produce "A" work, in a classroom in which students possess variable ability and talents?
- How do you conduct relevant participatory action research that is rigorous without turning students into research assistants in the scholarship of discovery?

The ideal of research on the high ground compounded the problem implicit in the first question. Some students had difficulty believing we were doing "real" research, and in a few cases they became so exasperated they questioned the study's relevance. It is hard to motivate students in work that seems to have neither rigor nor relevance. The second question is actually easiest to answer. You find the special gift of each student and have him or her contribute it. It may be cover design, art work, editing, logistics and organization — any of the tasks that require the range of multiple intelligences that we know are at work in any classroom (Gardner 1993). In that answer, we also find the answer to the last question. We help students to develop themselves when we set high standards in all areas, but the highest in the areas in which they excel and can make their most meaningful contribution.

These questions frame another scholarship of engagement, one explicitly for the classroom. They are messy, confusing, technically unsolvable questions, just as Schon warned (Schon 1995). They are also at the heart of the curriculum and concerns of educators. PAR fits within American higher education uncomfortably because it models relevance and vigor. By doing so, it scrapes back a thin veneer of dry curriculum to reveal the swampy lowlands at the center of our own campuses. ■

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### About the Author

Richard A. Couto (Ph.D., University of Kentucky) is a professor and George Matthews and Virginia Brinkley Modlin Chair in Leadership Studies at the University of Richmond. He is co-editor, with Theodore Becker, of *Teaching Democracy By Being Democratic*.