

## **Broadening and Deepening the Definition of Outreach Scholarship: Linking Popular Education and Community- Based Participatory Action Research**

**Kalyani Rai**

### **Abstract**

This paper outlines a Community-based Participatory Action Research model designed and implemented by the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee School of Continuing Education with two community-based agencies in Milwaukee. In two participatory action learning seminars, research was combined with action to improve the educational experience of community residents. Linking education and community life made it possible to address specific community-identified problems. Our experience emphasizes the need to create a learning environment by bringing together the theory and practice of popular education and community development. The paper then gives a broader and deeper definition of scholarship that: (1) recognizes the development of new knowledge through collaboration with community partners, (2) promotes mutual learning to address significant issues in the community, and (3) strengthens an effective partnerships that links the university with the community.

### **Introduction**

**I**n recent years, funders have been increasing the pressure on community-based agencies, (CBAs) to improve the quality and effectiveness of programs. This serious concern is already being addressed in concrete ways, as is evident in the outcome measurement resource network initiated by the United Way (*United Way of America 2001*). It is, therefore, more and more important for the CBAs to design and monitor program goals, outcomes, and strategies to effectively address community issues and needs. Although many of the agencies have been providing various programs and services with an intent to increase the capacity of community residents and to bring positive changes in their families and communities, much time and effort is often spent on responding to requests for funding in an effort to sustain these programs. Problems often arise in these programs, which tend to be funder-driven and detached from the real challenges facing the community. In such conditions, life-long learning connections are missing in the educational programs,

so that many grassroots residents feel a sense of alienation from education. Reflecting on this situation led this researcher to frame the following questions: What is missing in traditional community-based education programs? What would it take for community-based agencies to provide a participatory action learning and teaching model that would connect the life experiences of the participants and community issues?

The collaborative partnership between the University of Wisconsin Outreach and two community-based agencies, YWCA Family Center and the Hmong American Friendship Association, provides two concrete examples of how it is possible to work toward making educational experiences of community residents more meaningful. These two case examples of participatory action learning seminars suggest ways to: (1) implement participatory action learning projects in community based agencies, (2) produce learner-generated study materials as a tool for learning and promoting community development, and (3) identify key principles that will bring popular education and community development together.

### Designing and Implementing Community-Based Participatory Action Research

In 1999, the author implemented two participatory action learning seminars, one with a focus on multicultural/multiracial parenting issues with the YWCA Family Center, and one dealing with the issues of domestic violence with the Hmong American Friendship Association. The first initiative involved a group of parents and the agency staff from the Family Center; the second one involved a group of Hmong families and professionals representing the legal system, police department, service providers, and agency staff.

The seminars were designed as part of ongoing programs offered through these agencies. The goal of participatory action learning seminars is to engage a group of professionals and community members collectively, in a continuous process of reflection and activity related to the knowledge people generate within their local context and the methods they use to solve pressing community problems. For example, participants in the Family Center became actively involved in interpreting their own experience through the creation, production, publication, and distribution of their own learner-generated handbook on multicultural parenting. The following sections outline the goals and implementing strategies of the two case examples.

**Multicultural Parenting Action Learning Seminar with the YWCA Family Center:** This program is a continuation of the multicultural parenting workshop series started by the Family Center of the YWCA of Greater Milwaukee in 1996-97. The workshop series started with a group of ten or twelve parents who had concerns about raising children in a multicultural world. A majority of these parents were regular participants in services provided by the Family Center.

In 1997-98, the Family Center and UWM-Center for Urban Community Development formed a partnership to develop a new action learning program. The Family Center was interested in this project both as a response to the multicultural/multiracial needs of the parents and as a way of contributing to the YWCA stated mission of eliminating racism. Both the Family Center and the Center for Urban Community Development invested staff time and resources in developing the curriculum for this program.

Each agency project was organized as a Participatory Action Research seminar. The format for the seminar consists of twelve monthly two-hour sessions, each including group activities involving identification of problems, critical incident analysis, decisions about selecting different strategies, feedback, and reflections on what has been learned. During these seminar sessions, participants engage in meaningful dialogue and collective inquiry as a group. The dialogue includes problem-solving around issues of cultural identity, multicultural adoption, racial prejudices, religious intolerance, and social isolation. The following story shared by one of our class members illustrates this learning process.

Diagram 1 illustrates a critical incident that was shared by one of the class participants. It depicts how a mother tried to help her child complete a Thanksgiving school assignment that was brought home. The goal of the assignment was to link the student's family

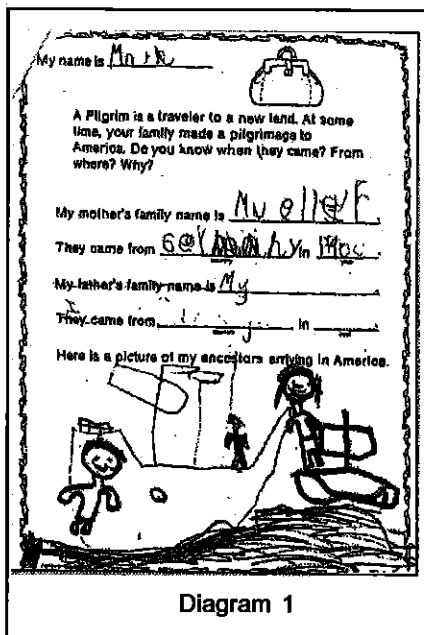


Diagram 1

history with that of pilgrims in a positive and affirming manner. The child was asked to give his parents' names and draw a picture of his ancestors coming to America. As a single parent of two adopted children, this mother experienced intense feelings and anxieties as

she tried to fill out the form in different ways. This was not possible because the child was adopted and did not know his birth parents' names or ancestors. To compound the issue, she was European American: he was from Latin America and they couldn't relate to the questions about ancestors as pilgrims coming across the Atlantic and landing in the New World.

The group members recognized that the problem she was facing as a parent of adopted children was bigger than herself and her family. It had broader social,

### **Revised Thanksgiving Assignment**

We have been discussing Pilgrims, and our own family histories. Every family's history is different and each one tells an important story about how America grew. Here are some things to think about:

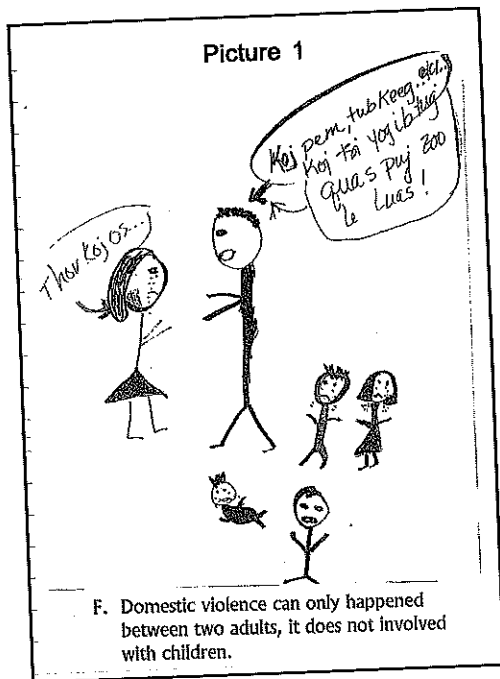
- Where did your family live at the time of the Pilgrims?
- Did they already live in America or did they live in another country?
- Did all the members of your family come from the same place?
- When and how did they make their journeys?

Ask a grown-up to help you write one or two sentences about your family, then draw a picture that tells your family's story.

**Diagram 2**

institutional, and political implications. The group dialogue helped her frame an alternative assignment that would be more inclusive and validating of diverse family experiences. She took that assignment and offered her suggestions to the teacher, who responded in a closed and defensive manner. But the mother persisted. Her story became a part of a handbook, which the class developed, that now serves as a tool for teaching multicultural issues in schools, and community. This handbook has been well received by teachers, schools, and community organizations.

***The Hmong Participatory Domestic Violence Action Learning Seminar:*** This action learning seminar was developed in collaboration with the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee Outreach and the Hmong American Friendship Association. The class was designed to bring together a group of ten to twelve participants representing Hmong families, Hmong community-based agencies, the court system, police department, and other service provider agencies to discuss issues of domestic violence. The seminar provided an opportunity

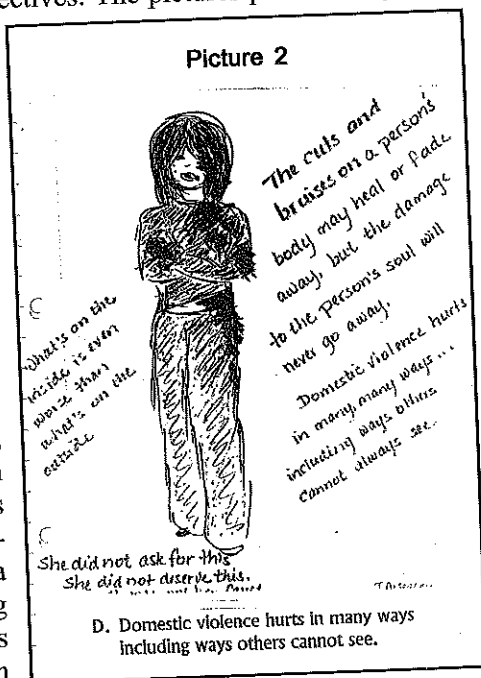


to discuss the issues of domestic violence in the Hmong community. The goal was to enhance the capacity of Hmong community agencies to develop culturally competent in-service training programs to bridge the cultural and linguistic gaps between the community, legal systems, and service providers.

The action learning seminar consisted of ten two-hour sessions. The class members contributed to their learning by sharing personal and

professional experiences through drawing pictures that reflected their values, assumptions, and experiences regarding domestic violence from their different perspectives. The pictures produced by class participants illustrate the learning process.

Pictures 1 and 2 represent the participants' narrative and interpretation of domestic violence in the Hmong families and community. This drawing exercise is an excellent way to stimulate discussion among a diverse group of people who have significant cultural, language and educational differences. Through this simple exercise the participants identified a number of issues relating to domestic violence, as well as contradictions in



interpretations of domestic violence by the Hmong community and the legal system.

Participants in both seminars saw the importance of telling and compiling their stories. The multicultural parenting group members have given a series of presentations on multicultural parenting issues and have distributed their handbook to state, local, and national audiences. The domestic violence seminar sparked several new initiatives, including a training program for court and community interpreters and a clan leaders' training program aimed at comparing and contrasting the Hmong sociocultural rules regarding domestic violence and those of the mainstream legal system.

### Theoretical Implications

These participatory action learning seminars were designed to make a direct connection between classroom learning and everyday family life of the grassroots participants, incorporating their interests, values, and passion. Bringing together two mutually reinforcing traditions in education creates this learning environment. Popular education and community development together provide a vehicle to connect learning with life.

*Popular education* means an approach to education inspired by Freire and Horton that emphasizes dialogue and interaction among teachers and learners in a group setting. Each member in this group setting is equally a learner and a teacher, someone who contributes to the learning of everyone else (Freire 1985; Horton and Freire 1990).

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*Community development*, means approaches to education that focus on involving people in addressing real-life issues and solving community problems. As popular educators, we saw the issues of multicultural parenting and domestic violence as opportunities for self-empowerment through telling stories. As community developers, we looked for ways to engage the participants in addressing community-wide issues through concrete projects designed and initiated by the participants themselves.

Five perspectives are integrated into our approach to designing and facilitating participatory action learning seminars:

1. ***Building on a community's cultural strengths, resources, and wisdom.*** Community-based participatory action research seeks to build on strengths, relationships, and resources that exist within communities to share and address community concerns. These may include individual skills and assets (McKnight 1987), also called social capital (Putnam 1993). Community-based participatory research explicitly recognizes and seeks to support or expand social processes and structures that contribute to community members' ability to work together to improve and build on the knowledge within the social structure and community norms. This

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perspective points out that both popular education and community development evolve out of the daily life of participants. Start the programs from where the learners are, cognitively and emotionally. Connect the learning with their experience through storytelling, picturing, and narrating. This process reveals the issues that are alive for the group and explores the knowledge and capacities that already exist for addressing the issues. Through the storytelling, picture drawing, and the consequent compilation of learner-generated materials, the multicultural

parenting group realized that they really were able to be the "experts." Their experiences were valid, validated, and subsequently institutionalized for multicultural methods of problem solving. Researchers learned the valuable skill of listening to that silent voice and of understanding that there are ways of knowing other than "science." The community had skills and assets and problem-solving abilities, and the researchers developed a healthy respect for those ways.

2. ***Promoting a reciprocal relationship between the university and community-based agencies.*** community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) is a co-learning and co-teaching process that facilitates a collaborative reciprocal relationship based on trust. Shared responsibility, authority, and ownership between academic and community-based agencies are necessary (Israel et al. 1998). This can be accomplished through the academic member becoming an accepted member of the organization and

becoming familiar with its purpose and existing projects. Both the academic and his or her community counterparts become involved in every aspect of the process through planning, implementing, and assessing the learning seminars. In addition, this collaborative partnership entails the academic members' relinquishing control of educational design process. Our CBPAR research teams include members of the community groups and service providers, and the involvement of all these stakeholders reaches far beyond these projects. CBPAR participants are involved in designing the key research questions as well as deciding on the data to be analyzed.

The university is able to draw on the knowledge base and expertise of the community, and now the university acts as a resource to its community and is seen as more than a sterile teaching and research environment. This researcher and the team have gained the respect of the Hmong and other multicultural communities, who now have greater trust in the system. The other role is sometimes acting as broker and interpreter between the policymakers and service providers and the community. This process allows researchers to be exposed to community members' indigenous ways of knowing (Atkinson 2001). Community members in turn acquire further skills in how to conduct research. Recognizing that socially and economically marginalized communities often have not been allowed the power to name or define their own experience, researchers involved with CBPAR attend to the inequalities between themselves and community partners. Attempts to address this inequality may be difficult for those trained in conventional views of knowledge as generated, owned, and disseminated by the university (banking model of education).

3. ***Community as a curriculum and academicians as participants and catalysts.*** A key lesson learned through this work indicates that it is not enough for the outside academic member to take the experience of community members and process it within her or his own theoretical framework. Grassroots participants perceive such an approach as the academic's appropriation of knowledge and experience of people in the community. Rather than translating the knowledge and experience of people into theoretical abstract, the academic member should strive to facilitate and demonstrate the use of popular knowledge and experience.



themselves. Mainstream, traditional academic knowledge can be needed and appreciated, But only as part of a synthesizing approach. First, listen to participants' stories, and allow time and opportunity for them to recognize and appreciate the knowledge and wisdom in their own experience. As this appreciation evolves, they generate their own agenda for inquiry. At this point, the academic can bring

the texts and literature into the circle. Now the community can choose and respond to the academic texts from their own knowledge base. The group owns the framing of the key questions and appreciates its own knowledge to which the academic texts and experts respond in ways that advance the agenda of the community's own inquiry. The Hmong action learning seminar, enabled participants to draw, narrate, interpret, and give voice to the meaning of domestic violence in the Hmong community.

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4. ***Learner-generated material as a tool for strategic planning in community development.*** Community-based participatory action research seeks to disseminate findings and knowledge gained to all partners involved, in language that is understandable by and respectful to the community (Hall 1992). It attempts to build a body of knowledge related to community well-being while also integrating that knowledge with community change efforts that address the concerns of the communities involved (Green et al. 1995). The university commits to the translation and integration of research findings with community change efforts with the intention that all partners benefit. For example, the learner-generated handbook allowed participants to communicate with each other, and to share successes, challenges, and ideas without support from an expert. By writing their stories, participants learn from their own experience and communicate their experience directly to other groups and organizations. As a process, learner-generated materials can be directly linked to enhancing participants' skills in creative and analytic thinking, communication, problem solving, and strategic planning. This process of telling stories, narrating, and interpreting is a powerful tool for personal and community change.

5. ***Fostering long-term commitment by both academic and community-based agencies.*** Given the empowering nature of the research and action, community-based participatory action research requires a long-term commitment by all the partners involved. Establishing trust, facilitating skills, and cultivating the environment needed for conducting research and creating comprehensive approaches to community change involves an ongoing involvement. Com-

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munities need to be assured that outside researchers are committed to the development task after the funding is over. Some of the participants become students in other programs and long-term funded projects for professional development, and the community agencies as well as the community continue to use the university and our faculty and staff as capacity-building tools for their

empowerment. Powerful relationships are built, and we continue to mentor the participants in many of these CBPAR projects and subsequently locate other sources of funding for training projects.

In summary, community-based participatory research involves a collaborative partnership in a continuous learning process in which community members play an active role in designing, implementing, collecting, interpreting, analyzing and disseminating research findings in ways that will benefit the community. This process emphasizes the reciprocal transfer of knowledge, skills, and capacity. Through this process, the diverse perspectives of different communities are emphasized and the issues of equity and power are in the forefront of the partnership goals.

### Broadening and Deepening the Definition of Scholarship

Implementing a CBPAR model is a major challenge. Crucial to its success is a long-term investment and the development of coalition that can help to legitimize the research and its tangible results in the community. A CBPAR model can bring in funds to address issues (domestic violence/parenting education) as well as provide data supporting some hypotheses and suggesting others. Merging the rigor of research methodology and scholarly goals of

social science with the need to provide tangible services during and after the program poses special challenges to a CBPAR strategy.

Often outreach faculty ask: Does my research contribute to the practical concerns and issues of the community and to the scholarly goals of social science? Collaborative, community-based research would help solve an age-old ethical and professional dilemma. This is not simply doing research in communities for the advancement of the academy, rather, it is an effort in which both the academic researcher and the agency engage in partnership to co-generate knowledge and to define practical questions that are critical to the ongoing operation of community-based agencies and the development of professional agencies. Community-based research efforts are context-dependent, intentional action systems of guided process and practices for bringing about and sustaining meaningful dialogue and change. Whether and how CBPAR is carried out depends on the realities of each particular community organizational site. The project should be implemented in an organization or site by, with, and for local communities to provide answers for pressing problems. In doing so, an outreach scholar can join with communities in ongoing collaboration, continuously facilitating and co-creating opportunities for learning, action, and research.

Community-based participatory action research is a strategy that challenges traditional assumptions of scholarship, which

typically focus on the process of objective diagnosis, interpretations, explanation, and assessment of research data. It can enhance the relevance and use of research data by all partners involved while strengthening research and program development capacity of community-based agencies. It has potential to bridge the cultural gaps that may exist between partners and to increase the chances of overcoming understandable distrust of research on the part of communities that have historically been "subjects" of such research. Most importantly, community-based participatory action research engages communities that have been marginalized by examining the impact of marginalization and attempting to provide the tools to reduce and eliminate it.

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## Conclusion

This paper discusses the application of a participatory action-learning model employed in collaboration with two specific community-based agencies in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. We have come to understand that conducting community research requires more than understanding its methodology and collaborating with community partners. Although required changes may occur, a deeper shift in the academic culture and mindset is needed throughout the research process for outreach theory and practice to prosper. Leaders from the agencies and the university faculty have to work in complementary ways to bring about change in research culture. Academic research uses methods of scientific rigor for knowledge creation, but in CBPAR much more attention must be given to the role of the participants—they must be redefined from "subjects." An outreach scholar's role is to draw together and connect processes that are usually fragmented, such as action, learning, discovery, and forming partnerships. To confine research to only one of these categories is to undermine its role and to weaken its potential contributions to both community and academics.

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*"What are  
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Outreach scholars can no longer deliberate whether to contribute to scholarly work or to solve practical problems. Instead, appropriate questions are: What are the best ways to link action, research, and learning? What can we learn from our practice? And how will lessons learned from outreach faculty experiences be used to make community development efforts more meaningful? If we begin to answer these questions candidly, then improvements in our capacities to broaden and deepen outreach scholarship are sure to follow.

Furthermore, we hold that structural and social change is possible only in the presence of a liberated mind. In this sense, a liberation of mind is the primary task of our action learning seminars. Our discussion of the participatory action learning approach is intended to spark discussions among community practitioners and adult educators. The end in view is a deeper appreciation of the inseparability of popular education and community development practice. While it is possible to separate these two fields for discussion, in the real world, they are a single piece of cloth.

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## About the Author

Kalyani Rai is a nationally recognized scholar specializing in grassroots education, community building, multicultural communication strategies, and participatory action research. Dr. Rai is an assistant professor in the Center for Urban Community Development, University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee with ten years of community development experience working with Milwaukee's diverse populations. Her research, teaching, and outreach activities have centered on creating opportunities for grassroots residents' involvement in decision making and community problem-solving in ways that promote individual and community learning, empowerment, and transformation. Most recently, she received a grant from the U.S. Department of Education for implementing the Refugee Early Childhood Teacher Training and Mentoring Program that is designed to assist refugee bilingual individuals in becoming early childhood educators in Milwaukee's urban environment. Her previous work also includes

leading a national Ford Foundation initiative seeking to build capacity in women-led Asian-serving nonprofits with programs on women's reproductive health. Internationally, Dr. Rai is looking at indigenous communities in her native Nepal as well as pursuing collaborative research agendas with participatory action scholars in Australia and Canada. She is the recipient of many awards, including the University of Wisconsin—Extension Award for Faculty Excellence in 1999 and the University of Wisconsin System's Woman of Color Award in 1998. Dr. Rai received her Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin—Madison.