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Participatory Research and Service-Learning: A Natural Match for the Community and Campus

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Integrating academic content and service in the community brought my students a sense of connectedness between classroom learning and their personal lives and the lives of others within the larger community. This is the intent of service-learning, and like many other efforts at service-learning, this experience once again engaged students in terms of academic learning as well as affirming their connectedness to the larger community (Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999). How we as faculty can create a setting for this to occur is always challenging and exciting in terms of the unique and creative ways faculty are making these connections for themselves, students and communities. Serendipity has always played a role in creating these opportunities and my experience with this project is a good case in point. The happenstance of a requirement of a grant for interdisciplinary efforts and the nature of the intent to address the health needs of a community in a holistic way all came together to produce a unique opportunity to merge service-learning pedagogy and participatory research methodology. The result was a two pronged finding. On the one hand, service-learning was found to be a significant pedagogical means to teach participatory research as well as other forms of qualitative

research methods. On the other, participatory research methodology was found to have commonalities with the process of the service-learning requirements for engaging communities and providing the structure and means for accessing community service for students. The following is a description of these elements and how each contributed to our conceptualizations about the commonalities of participatory research and service-learning.

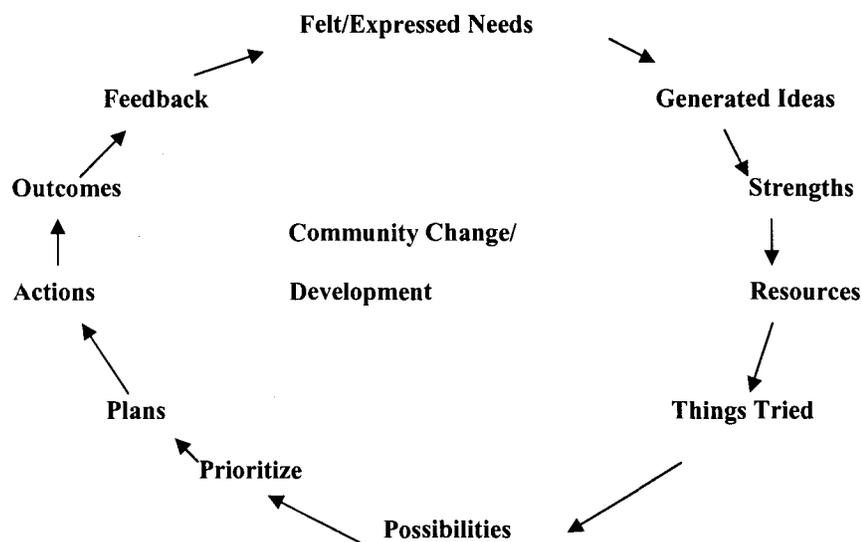**Characteristics of Participatory Research as a Methodology**

The community-based participatory research construct as described by Barbara Israel and her co-authors will be used throughout this paper as the model of participatory research (Israel, Schultz, Parker, & Becker, 2000). Although many other variations exist (Whyte, 1991; Stringer, 1996; Narayan-Parker, D., 1996), this community-based design lends itself to conceptualizing the service-learning pedagogy and campus-community linkage that is the focus of this paper.

Community-based participatory research [CBPR] is defined as a "collaborative approach to research that equitably involves, …community members, organizational representatives, and researchers in all aspects of the research process" (Israel, Schultz, Parker, & Becker, 2000, p.4). The consequences of this collaborative engagement is that "The partners contribute their expertise and share responsibilities and ownership…" (Israel, Schultz, Parker, & Becker, 2000, p. 4). Significantly, community-based participatory research [CBPR] has an iterative process that provides an ongoing engagement between campus and community in terms of learning as well as the development of skills, capacity, and power. Four fundamental points of this cyclic, iterative process are:

- Identifying community strengths and resources

- Selecting priority issues to address

- Collecting, interpreting, and translating research findings in ways that benefit the community

- Emphasizing the reciprocal transfer of knowledge, skills, capacity and power.

Figure (1.) demonstrates the iterative process by which community members participate over time to address changing issues and priorities

Participatory Research Process

Felt/Expressed Needs

Feedback

Generated Ideas

Outcomes

Strengths

Community Change/
Development

Actions

Resources

Plans

Things Tried

Prioritize

Possibilities

In this process model of CBPR, the felt needs and experiences of community members co-create, with researchers, ideas and identify strengths as to how these needs might be addressed. Over time, the possible actions that can be taken by the group are

generated. Plans evolve as iteration and review takes place. The many voices of the community members continually refine these ideas and plans into actions to be taken. As actions are initiated and a process of addressing the needs of the community are engaged, outcomes are monitored for possible adjustments that need to be made to insure an acceptable level of success in addressing the expressed needs of the community.

The Structure and Process of Service-Learning

A service-learning curriculum is based upon benefits occurring for both the student and the community as well as the significance of both service and academic learning (Furco, 1996). The challenge is "devising ways to connect study and service so that the disciplines illuminate and inform experience, and experience lends meaning and energy to the discipline" (Eskow, 1980, p.20).

Among the many definitions of service-learning, Jeffrey Howard's (1998) definition is significant in that it positions community service and academic learning into a reciprocal relationship that transforms both processes. He states, "Academic service-learning is a pedagogical model that intentionally integrates academic learning and relevant community services" (Howard, 1998, p.22). His model has four distinct components:
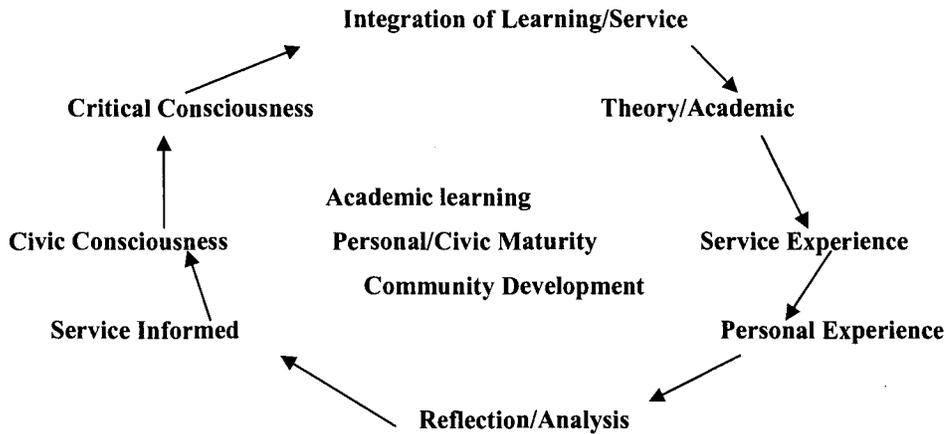
- Service learning is a pedagogical model

- There is an intentional effort made to utilize the community-based learning on behalf of academic learning, and utilize academic learning to inform the community service.

- There is an integration of two kinds of learning, experiential and academic; they work to strengthen each other.

- The community service experiences must be relevant to the academic course of study (Howard, 1998, p. 22).

From this perspective, service learning is an ongoing process that is iterative in terms of turning over and over again the information and experiences as course content and service experiences are joined again and again throughout the experience in both the community and the classroom. It is through this process and course structure that the "student's observations and experiences in the community setting [become] as pivotal to the student's academic learning as class lectures and library research" (Howard, 1998,p.21). It is this integration of service in the community and academic content that challenges the traditional "banking model" of education noted by Paolo Freire (1970) in which students attend a semester long course in which I, with the help of a text or two, actively enlist them in an intellectual exercise of remembering the specific content of the course and performing some prescribed recall of the material as given to them. Each student attempts to "master" the class assignments as much as the content of the course. In contrast, service-learning forces both the instructor and the students as a group as well as individually, to engage in processing the didactic academic content as well as the experiences incurred during the service component as "texts" for the course. Figure two shows this iterative process.

Figure 2:

Service-learning Process

Integration of Learning/Service

Critical Consciousness   Theory/Academic

Academic learning

Civic Consciousness   Personal/Civic Maturity   Service Experience

Community Development

Service Informed   Personal Experience

Reflection/Analysis

Serendipity: A Small Grant, A Community, and Interdisciplinary Learning

The grant provided a small amount of money to be used to initiate a demonstration project intended to form a campus-community partnership to address community health needs in a holistic way. In addition, the grant required an interdisciplinary approach to the project. The proposal for the grant had designated participatory research as the mechanism for assessing the community's health needs.

The community setting for this experience was a small group of First Nations People, the Waccamaw Siouan Community of South Eastern North Carolina. They were the community partners for the campus-community grant. This partnership was based on many years of working together around various issues related to community development and as a significant resource for classes in the social work department. This small group of several thousands is scattered over a rural area of several counties in various size enclaves. The majority of members live in two major rural settlements. Although

recognized by the state as First Nation People, the Federal agencies have not recognized them. They have a tribal council with an Executive Director and a Chief.

Both faculty and students from the various disciplines (Social Work, Sociology, Gerontology, and Nursing) were engaged in this process as the interdisciplinary component. In planning the implementation of the project, it was apparent that few faculty and none of the students were familiar with the actual processes of participatory research other than in the abstract. In each of the disciplines involved in the collaboration, there had been some previous attempts to introduce students to qualitative research methods through various means. For the most part, participatory research content was presented as additions to regular courses in the form of readings.

As the needs of the project began to develop, the opportunity for faculty and students to learn the process of participatory research emerged as one of the goals. How to engage the students became a moment of insight into the processes of service-learning and participatory research. Previous experience with service-learning courses enabled the faculty to recognize the linkage between the process of service-learning and the process of participatory research. In fact, as the assignments were developed, it was unclear if we were talking from a participatory research perspective or a service-learning perspective. Both required service in collaboration with community needs. Both required students to collaborate with members of the community through service that provided a great deal of learning about the community and its members for both students and community members. Both required ongoing reflection in the light of experiences and academic knowledge. It soon became clear that by engaging students in the participatory research with the community, they would be engaged in both service as well as learning the hands

on application of participatory research methodology. Importantly, it would be in the real world where everything does not go the way you have planned it. The actuality of the dynamics of community life would bring a particular poignancy to student and faculty learning. The student and faculty engagement in the process with the community members was both a learning opportunity as well as a service that addressed a community need. These elements met the basic definition of service-learning as well as basic tenets of participatory research methodology. It was at this point that a decision was made to create a special elective course on participatory research as part of the overall project. The course would be a service-learning course as well as an interdisciplinary course on participatory research. Both faculty and students would be involved in the course as participant collaborators with community members in the participatory research effort in the community, and as such, we would be engaged in a process of service-learning as well.

The reading content for the course came from several sources, among them, William Whyte's (1991) text, "Participatory Action Research," Ernest Stringer's (1996) text, "Action Research: A Handbook for Practitioners," and a presentation by Israel, B., Schultz, A., Parker, E., & Becker, A. (2000), "Community-based participatory research: Engaging communities as partners in health research." This material formed the basis for the didactic part of the course. Students were assigned the readings to provide the academic background for reflection and integration of experiential learning in the community. This material was also given to the community coordinator as well as reviewed in meetings with students, community members and faculty. Given the amount of time needed in the community to conduct focus groups as part of the initial participatory research process, the class met only a few times prior to a series of Saturday

sessions were students and faculty worked alongside community members in the focus groups. Focus groups were chosen as the initial process for the semester class and community effort. The course lasted one semester with follow-up through individual student projects by a few of the students. Faculty stayed engaged in the process beyond the semester. This could have easily been a course that repeated over several semesters with students coming and going each semester. The nature of the work with the community members would have accommodated this change over. Each phase of the research would have been appropriate entering points for students, given the iterative nature of the methodology.

The Common Elements of Service-learning and Participatory Research

Jeffrey Howard (1998) poses several demands on traditional as well as service-learning pedagogy. He asks, "How can we strengthen student capacity to utilize community-based learning on behalf of academic learning" and likewise "apply their academic learning to their community service" (Howard, 1998, p.22)? These are pivotal issues for service-learning if it is to be an academic pedagogy. If one takes this synergistic working of academic content and experience as the key to service-learning pedagogy, then it is an easy next step to seeing the connections inherent in learning the art of participatory research using service-learning as the structure of that learning. Likewise, it is a small step to see the utility of participatory research as a service-learning structure and process. Both are iterative processes and follow the same basic organizational process. In fact, they are images of each other. Herein lies the key to utilizing service-learning to learn participatory research, as well as utilizing participatory research designs to serve as service-learning structures. In the case of learning research

methodology, it is in the doing that students gain real understanding. It is in the doing, the experience during service itself, that the students are informed of the true realities of the research process and the community context in which participatory research must always be engaged.

Likewise, participatory research can be viewed as a structure for service-learning experiences and can be applied to many forms of academic course content. Students doing community service as a member of a community participatory research effort are exposed to a wide array of information and experience. For instance, inherent in the experience of being engaged in participatory research is the exposure to understanding group processes, political agendas working at the grass root level and higher, as well as social, cultural, and diversity expressions that include the hopes and desires of individuals and groups in a community. In many ways, participatory research can open the heart of a neighborhood or larger community to students who have never considered or pondered the ordeals and workings of community life. It not only exposes this felt experience but engages the student in meaningful community action and civic responsibility around important community issues.

As the course proceeded, it became evident to the faculty and students that we were engaged in a process that was both service-learning as well as participatory research. Through reflection and integration of experiences with didactic readings, various commonalities emerged. The following list illustrates the functional commonalities existing between service-learning pedagogy and participatory research methodology:

1. Both serve the felt/expressed needs of the community.

2. Both include a partnership/collaboration between community and campus.

3. Both provide an opportunity for structure, organization, and supervision needed for success of both the community and the student learner.

4. The experience as a participant in the community research effort exists as the theoretical construct of participatory research methodology *in action* for both the community members as well as the student. Both learn the research process by doing. Both learn a needed skill. This engagement permits the students to integrate the experiential and theoretical learning in a meaningful and personal manner.

5. Learning for both the community members and the student goes beyond the primary focus of the research or course content to include numerous insights into the community and its people in all their complexity. This can build critical and civic consciousness for both student and community members.

6. Learning for both participants, community members and students, is personal in terms of working closely with people with whom they would be very unlikely to interact. This too contributes to building critical and civic consciousness as well as an increased sense of community for non-students and for students.

7. Both processes are iterative and cyclic in terms of processing information. The experience informs the knowledge as the knowledge gained informs the process and understanding. Reflection and feedback are significant elements of this knowledge building process for both service-learning and participatory research.
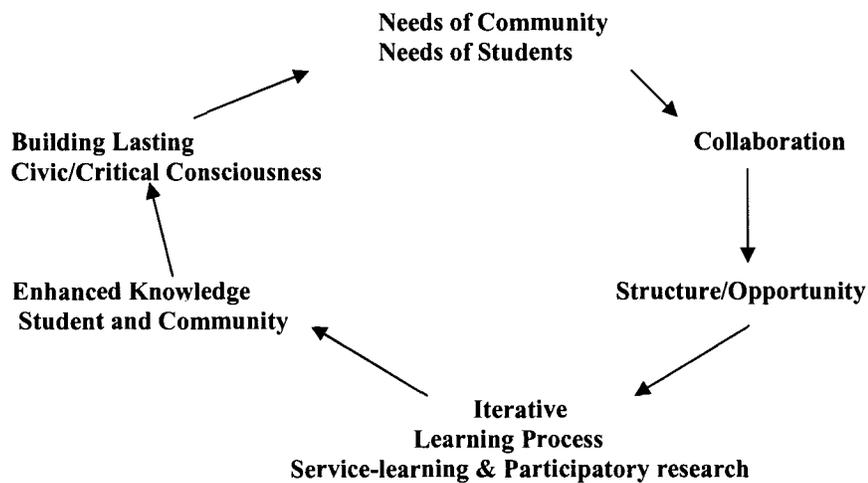
8. Elements as noted by Robert Sigmon (1979) are shared by both processes:

- Those being served control the service(s) provided.

- Those being served become better able to serve and be served by their own actions.

- Those who serve [or participate] are also learners and have significant control over what is learned.

Figure 3 shows this iterative common ground:

Figure 3.

Common Ground

**Needs of Community
Needs of Students**

**Building Lasting
Civic/Critical Consciousness**

Collaboration

**Enhanced Knowledge
Student and Community**

Structure/Opportunity

**Iterative
Learning Process
Service-learning & Participatory research**

Outcomes for Students, Faculty and Community

Students learned about themselves, the Waccamaw community, and the process of participatory research. The students demonstrated in their final papers a significant understanding of the complexity of the lives of the members of this community in the context of today's issues as well as the historical realities with which they have had to struggle. Through working closely with members of the community and assisting with

the community focus groups, each student gained significant understanding of how communities work as well as the specific issues facing this community. They learned about the strengths and resiliency of the Waccamaw community and understood how resourceful and successful these people had been despite the lack of resources and oppression they had to endure. One student stated that the course "taught me patience, discipline, and compassion for an oppressed people." Another student reconsidered her intent of "doing" research "on the people" and learned that the success came from working "with" the members of the community. Many students learned the art of relationship building and recognized that they were guests in the community, challenging previous ideas of the researcher as expert observer. Participatory research took on a personal understanding that was sophisticated in that they recognized that communities do not follow methodological outlines in simple step-by-step ways. They came to recognize that many factors influenced the work that they did, including political and personal issues within the community itself. The learning took on a reality that critiqued the content of the didactic academic content itself. The play between the experiences and the didactic content was a central learning factor. In many ways, this learning was palpable. It was visceral in ways that most students do not experience in the classroom alone. A student from a traditional discipline that prided itself on its empiricism and scientific approach particularly noted this learning. The student drew an analogy using a marine biologist and a good fisherman, "Being a good marine biologist doesn't make you a good fisherman. To be a good fisherman you need to know the fish and the water that is their home, you need to spend a lot of time with them in their home and begin to understand their behavior and habits (Annsley, UNCW participant). Most students

expressed that they had learned more about the academic constructs as well as the reality of doing research than they had ever in a traditional research course.

Faculty were confronted with a learning process that they could not control as they could in the typical classroom setting. Students were not only learning the fundamentals of participatory research but the "real world" version and all of its nuances and particularities of context. Faculty from different disciplines brought different approaches that gave the students demonstrations of contrasting ways of working and thinking of community. During the reflections, on site discussions, and student papers, students were eager to critique these differences in the context of what they were learning from the text as well as their respective disciplinary backgrounds.

The community members were introduced to a version of what they had already seen as part of their tradition, the First Nations People's practice of community dialogues. The focus group process was similar to traditional First Nations Peoples' community process. Tribal councils and community conversations were something they were familiar with and supported. This "formal" process gave them an opportunity to do what was, in a different form, traditional tribal custom. This helped bring a good deal of recognition on the part of faculty and students that the academy is not always the exclusive center of knowledge. For the community, this was a tradition that was truly integrated within the fabric of the community. It was something that they had not actively pursued for some time and this effort was an opportunity to express a deeply held cultural value.

Members of the community recognized the strengths of their community as they began to think of the community in terms of what makes it healthy and what they had already been doing and planning. Much of these early findings supported most of what

community was thinking about individually and as a group. Various issues such as elder care, school attendance and job training for their young people were identified as important to the welfare and health of the community. All groups discussed recreational facilities and organized activities for the young people. Interestingly, the youth wanted efforts made to repair and paint a twelve foot carving of a First Nation chief's head that stood outside the tribal headquarters. They wanted to have their identity as First Nation's Peoples in full view of all who passed by.

Conclusion

Service-learning and participatory research both come from a position of respect and belief in the possibilities of others. In the case of service-learning pedagogy, this includes the student as contributor to learning, faculty recognizing learning as a sharing process, and the community and its members inviting students and faculty into their world as learners. Learning occurs over time through iteration and reflection. Knowledge emerges through the process itself. Likewise, participatory research recognizes its efforts as a service and collaboration with community members as active participants who invite the research effort into the community. The learning takes place through mutual respect and sharing. The collaborative process is reciprocal and iterative as well as reflective. Knowledge also emerges through the process itself and is not imposed from external theory or expertise.

The processes for both service-learning and participatory research follow closely the work of David Kolb (1984) and experiential learning theory. If one interjects students into the participatory research collaboration, both the student and the community members are engaging in a process that involves direct, ongoing experience followed by

reflection and conceptualization, that brings the participants into testing and acting on the developing ideas in the real world. All of this leads back on itself in an iterative learning process. Service-learning takes us through the same process as it brings together abstract conceptualizations with concrete experience, and through reflection and action, engages students in a cycle of learning and knowledge building.

Service-learning has as one of its hoped for outcomes the building of civic and critical consciousness on the part of students and community members too. It is reflective of an effort to connect academic learning to life outside the academy. Palmer (1993) has stated that the most significant issue for education "…is whether we are educating students in ways that make them responsive to the claims of community upon their lives" (p. xvii). Both service-learning and participatory research asks of students and faculty that they engage learning within the community and in a reciprocal form that benefits all involved. Likewise, Rhodes (1997) points to the significance of community service needing to be of mutual benefit between equals that is a hallmark of participatory research as well as service-learning.

The common elements of service-learning and participatory research provide a natural match for campus and community partnerships. The goals of the community and the students are addressed through collaboration around community needs in a structured setting that organizes the means for both student and community to gain knowledge and critical consciousness. This is taking place in terms of ongoing collaborative reflection and iteration and leads to enhancing learning potential and civic consciousness. Both the methodology of participatory research and service-learning pedagogy are natural partners in learning.

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Robert Blundo teaches in the Department of Social Work and has been active within his department and across the university in promoting service-learning pedagogy. He has developed several courses that are service-learning based. One such course takes students to Appalachia to do service for one week as part of a summer course in rural social work. He has presented papers on service-learning at both national and regional professional meetings, including regional Campus Compact Service-Learning meetings.

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