

**Assessing the Merit of Teaching Community-Based Research
At the Undergraduate Level**

Supplemental paper prepared for Environmental Studies 400C
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by
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Introduction:

Many students enter university with the hopes of being able to change the world. As time goes on, many modify this goal and hope to be able to at least help others a little bit, but more importantly to be able to find a good job when they are finished or to be able to start paying back their student loans. There are very few opportunities within their courses for students at the undergraduate level to become involved in "changing the world" even if it is only one small aspect within their own community. Students are faced with writing numerous papers and exams which take time and effort, but which often serve them with only a grade rather than with a sense of achievement or a feeling of pride for doing something positive for society. They are also pressured to feel that the only way to succeed is to become powerful and wealthy. If there were more opportunities for undergraduate students to become involved in their community, in research, and in contributing to social justice during their education, then perhaps more people would keep their dreams and determination of changing the world after they graduate too. In this paper I will explore the idea of teaching and involving undergraduate students in community-based research as a part of the curriculum, and discuss how this could benefit students and society as a whole. For the purposes of this paper I will only use the term 'community-based research,' however, it is meant to cover the range of its facsimiles such as Participatory Research (PR), Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Action Research (AR).

Background on Community-Based Research:

There is no one, single accepted definition of 'community-based research' and/or its facsimiles, however there are a number of different interpretations of it as well as a few basic principles that apply to what community-based research must entail. Green et al. (1997: 53) describe the distinguishing characteristics as; "(a) extensive collaboration between traditionally defined researchers and the community in each research stage from identifying the problem to applying and disseminating results; (b) a reciprocal educational process between community and researchers; and (c) an emphasis on taking action on the issue under study". One definition which incorporates these characteristics is "the process of producing new knowledge by systematic inquiry, with the collaboration of those affected by the issue being studied, for the purposes of education and taking action or effecting social change" (Greene et al., 1997 as quoted in Macaulay & Commanda, 1999: 774).

The inability of selecting one specific definition of community-based underscores the fact that this sort of research is not simple nor straightforward, rather it is dynamic and adaptive. It will be different in each setting, or community, and it will be up to community members and researchers as to what they feel the best steps and methods will be for them within the context and limitations of the work.

Community-based research is not a new type of research, however it is still not a widely known or accepted kind of research. According to Macaulay and Commanda, it "Began as a movement for social justice in international development settings. It was developed to help improve social and economic conditions, to affect change and to reduce the distrust of the people being studied" (1999: 774). Even though community-

based research has proven to be very advantageous in many settings for both the researchers and those being 'studied,' (Berardi, 2002; Chapdelaine & Chapman, 1999; Macaulay & Commanda, 1999; Ferrari & Jason, 1996; Lucas, 1993; Poole, 1991) community-based research is still commonly rejected even today as being "weak in theory, poorly documented and ungeneralizable to other settings" (Poole, 1991: 235). Additionally, it is very difficult to measure the effectiveness of community-based research strategies and as some researchers believe "requires qualitative methodologies and new ways of looking at how communities work" (Lucas, 1993: 495). So although many researchers and community members see the benefits and positive outcomes of this kind of research, there are still many academics and institutions that believe there is a lot of work that needs to be done before it will be accepted completely.

Teaching Community-Based Research at the Undergraduate Level:

Why incorporate community-based research methods and projects at the undergraduate level? There are definite advantages to introducing this topic to students, however there are some considerable drawbacks as well. By teaching students to integrate research methodology, theory, and the community as well as working towards creating positive change, they are more likely to feel passionate about what they are doing, and more likely to feel as though they can make a contribution to society. The most significant advantages to teaching and involving students in community based research include: factual knowledge of a topic area, increases in concern for others, self esteem, awareness of ones civic responsibilities, as well as an integration of research application and field experience, personal growth, impact on career goals, an increased

notion of 'constructive altruism' for their community, critical thinking, communication and problem solving skills. These also provide a learning opportunity for students as well as needed information for the community (Chapdelaine & Chapman, 1999; Ferrari & Jason, 1996).

A study conducted by Ferrari and Gellar (1994) to observe the effects of learning and teaching community-based research found that "...active participation in a community-based project, in which the opportunity to build self esteem and a sense of belongingness may be facilitated, seems to have been a positive influence on college students" (Ferrari & Gellar as quoted in Ferrari & Jason, 1996: 446). They found that students felt their education had been enriched and that they had a desire to repeat the experience because their active involvement in community-based research made a difference in the lives of others (Ferrari & Jason, 1996). Chapdelaine and Chapman (1999) also did a survey of the impacts on students after being involved in a community-based research class at the undergraduate level and they found that it was extremely valuable because the students were able to apply methodological concepts and issues, as well as learn first hand research ethics and ethical issues, and it enhanced students enjoyment and interest in research. The researchers concluded that the rewards outweigh the costs when teaching and using community-based research projects in undergraduate curriculum, they found that: "Students appreciate the experience and gain much more than a basic understanding of methodological concepts. The project is a unique opportunity for them to collaborate with community agencies and to achieve tangible goals" (Chapdelaine & Chapman, 1999:106).

While there are numerous positive aspects of teaching community-based research to undergraduate students, there are also some significant drawbacks and limitations to consider. Time is a major factor in community-based research projects. It differs from conventional research methods in that it integrates members of the community in its endeavors and so these research projects commonly take a lot longer due to the necessities of everyday life which may affect the community members. Time for undergraduate students is also a pressing issue (Berardi, 2002; Chapdelaine & Chapman, 1999; Ferrari & Jason, 1996). Most undergraduate classes last four months, and a community-based research project will most likely run a lot longer than this, so it is often difficult to produce research of any depth or quality that would have an effect.

Additionally, students, like community members, have a lot of other things going on in their lives. This could lead to major problems in coordinating times for everyone to meet together. Students will also most likely have to conduct a lot of the research outside of their class time, which could potentially cut into their other classes or their personal life. Furthermore, this type of class and project involves a huge investment of time on the part of the professor. Not only is there the administrative aspects and the necessity of meeting the needs of the students, but also those of the community members. A great deal of time needs to be spent by the professor in order to coordinate people, meetings, research and activities on both sides.

One of the most significant problems that can arise with a community-based research project is that because it is not conducted in the classroom "...it often involves aspects that are beyond the instructors control, including the number of respondents in the community who agree to participate and the introduction of error by multiple students"

(Chapdelaine & Chapman, 1999: 104). A number of situations could arise which could potentially ruin and end the research, however students still want to receive their grades and professors still need to see completed course work. So uncertainties can potentially lead to a number of problems.

Referring back to a point mentioned earlier, there are still a lot of questions which remain surrounding this kind of research, as well as a lot of indecision and a lack of widespread general theory. This makes teaching the theory about community-based research slightly variable and difficult because with each situation, issues may change. This can be confusing for students because the topic is not cut and dried, rather more dynamic and situational. Chapdelaine and Chapman (1999) also note that because the impact of the project may not be seen for some time, students may not grasp how influential their work was and this discredits the benefits of having students feel that they have helped to create positive change.

**Case Study: Environmental Studies 400C at the University of Victoria May 2003-
"Community Based Research in the Clayoquot Sound Region."**

During the month of May 2003, 13 undergraduate students from a variety of disciplines at the University of Victoria were able to participate in an upper level Environmental Studies class entitled "Community-based Research in the Clayoquot Sound Region." While this was not a research methods class, and it was not required of the students to conduct 'research,' this class offered the opportunity for undergraduate students to learn basic theory behind community-based research, a topic not often taught at this level. Additionally, it allowed them to participate in a field trip away from the University to see first hand the complications and issues that can arise within a highly

"researched" community, as well as the benefits and the necessity of university-community collaboration and community-based research programs. It offered students a hands on approach and a deeper sense of what they were learning about, as well as an understanding of the importance of involving the community in research and about the inherent connection between involvement and change. Through a variety of guest speakers from the Clayoquot Sound region communities, students learned that when researchers involve and inform community members about what they are doing, ask community members what they need researched and include them in the research process, then the outcomes of the research have the potential to be more beneficial and of greater, long lasting impact within the community.

Student opinions about the benefits of taking this course were largely positive. Most students agreed that learning about this kind of research and taking a class of this sort was very beneficial, it gave them a greater sense of seeing results and creating change. Additionally, students felt it was a very positive aspect of their undergraduate experience, one where they actually felt apart of something, and as though they were doing more than just writing papers that have no larger impact. One student when asked how she felt about the course stated that it was a course "...that gave a practical understanding of the theoretical material in a positive format that encouraged students to take part in their learning." This was a very key point in this course, that students actually took part in their learning. Through being actively involved, students are more deeply affected by the course material, they will inevitably remember their trip and what they learned a lot more than they will a multiple choice exam on different research methods. Furthermore, students are more likely to feel more connected to the area and to have a

better sense of the positive outcomes research can have if it is done appropriately. They are more likely to feel a commitment towards conducting research that helps communities and societies, and not just of interest within the realm of academia. Because they were able to see positive and negative impacts of research on the region, there will undoubtedly be more of an acknowledgement by students that community-based research should be conducted when appropriate and that a major aspect of their future research should be to create positive change within society.

Conclusion:

It is clear that there are many complexities and uncertainties which may arise when teaching community- based research methods and projects at the undergraduate level. However, previous studies and research, as well as the case study of ES 400C at the University of Victoria seem to demonstrate that the benefits of teaching these classes outweigh the costs and, in fact, that there are many immeasurable benefits for both communities, students, professors and the larger society which may not be seen at the time of the research, but are revealed afterwards in their effects. Universities need to train their students to work towards greater social good, and as Ferrari and Jason (1996: 446) so superbly put it:

“Emphasis on cooperation and social responsibility in the curriculum is needed. Students have become markedly more materialistic and focused on power and status and much less concerned with serving others...the opportunity for students to apply research skills to community and social issues seems to be an important starting point for integrating research and community service... By blending important scientific skills with a service orientation focused on community issues, educators may have a significant impact on the lives of students and in turn society.”

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