



Pedagogies of Praxis: Course-Based Action Research in the Social Sciences

Nila Ginger Hofman and Howard Rosing, editors, Anker Publishing, 2007.

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Pedagogies of Praxis is an edited collection of eight self-contained articles bracketed with an introduction to the concept of course-based action research (CBAR) and an overview of the book and a closing piece that provides perspectives from some of the community-based organizations, written by Nila Ginger Hofman. The authors of the articles are faculty members and students at six colleges and universities, including a mix of public and private institutions in the US and one public institution in the UK. The courses discussed in the articles represent both undergraduate and graduate learning experiences in the disciplines of anthropology, community planning, geography, sociology, and women's studies and gender studies.

Although all have a concluding section, the articles do not follow a common format in terms of their overall organization. Nonetheless, I would say that all the authors do a reasonably good job of describing their campuses, their courses, and their community partners. Regardless of their prior experience with service learning and action research, each of the CBAR projects described in this book appears to be a new development for the authors, so all describe the process of getting started. Not surprisingly, most of the authors take advantage of existing relationships with community partners or call upon the staff of the campus community service office to broker their partnerships. It's evident that most of these authors have a common commitment to involving the partner organization or group as fully as possible in the planning and (in most cases) the execution of the research project.

Because most of these projects are in the early stages, I was unable to ascertain from these articles how the relationships with the partner organizations evolved over time as succeeding groups of students worked with them on research activities. A noteworthy exception is Joan Arches' article "Youth Take Charge: Social Action in a University-Community Partnership" that covers multiple semesters, with some students continuing for more than one semester but all eventually having to make the transition out of the project—and with the youth served by the community-based organization having to make similar transitions in their relationships to the college students.

Although the authors generally made some mention of the course work, I didn't always get a very good sense from reading these articles of the way the classroom end of the projects worked or what roles the faculty members played in facilitating the learning process and the partner relationship. It appeared in all cases that the classes were quite small, often less than ten students, and that most of the undergraduates were traditional-aged. For me, the most interesting CBAR projects were those in which the students were also residents of the neighborhoods where the research was taking place. This is a phenomenon mentioned by Daniel Block and Mark J. Bouman in their article "Paradoxes of Praxis: Community-Based Learning at a

Community-Based University.”

Each article in **Pedagogies of Praxis** includes a stand-alone bibliography. These are goldmines of good articles and books on subjects related to course-based action research. The book also includes a brief topic index that aids in navigating through the sections if one is trying to track down a particular piece of information.

In her closing piece, Hofman observes that “...relatively few social scientists have been engaged in CBAR” (p. 153), yet I found no discussion at either end of this volume about how the editors solicited contributions. Given that two of the articles report on courses offered at DePaul University, the editors’ home campus, and a third comes from a pair of geographers at nearby Chicago State University, I suspect that the call for submissions may have been limited to people the editors or their close associates already knew. I can’t even begin to guess from this book how many social scientists have tried CBAR. I would have liked to know more about their process for soliciting contributions and interacting with the contributors.

In a recent article in **Change** (July/August 2007, 36-41), John Tagg uses the analogy of single-loop and double-loop learning to explain why it is so difficult for higher education institutions to evolve, even when that evolution is both necessary for survival and consistent with our espoused theories of how we ought to act. I think that the course-based action research described in this book exemplifies several aspects of this problem quite well—without addressing them to the extent that I would have liked to see. These include the following:

- The length of a course term can become a limiting factor affecting the student learning experience, the natural progression of any research project, and the needs of a community partner.
- The number of students enrolled in a course may preclude the use of course-based action research as a pedagogical approach or necessitate the faculty member finding multiple research opportunities (and possibly partners) to accommodate all the students.
- In the absence of a campus-based office of community service, finding and maintaining a relationship with an appropriate community partner can present the faculty member with a significant challenge.
- Many institutions don’t give full recognition to the value of course-based action research when the faculty member applies for tenure or promotion (or even reappointment, in the case of a faculty member on a fixed length contract).
- Course or program requirements (some grounded in accreditation) may interfere with the creative use of course-based action research as a component of a student learning experience.
- Overall university policy or plans related to (for example) fund-raising or build-ing construction may conflict with the desires and intentions of a course-based action research project or have a negative impact on a relationship with a valued community

partner.

- Institutional review boards may restrict the ability of faculty members and students to engage in course-based action research that entails interaction with vulnerable populations, such as children and adolescents, persons with mental illness, or persons living in extended care facilities.

Whether we are writing how-to manuals, conducting comparative case studies or empirical analyses, or reflecting on concepts and challenges, those of us who are committed to promoting service learning and course- and community-based action research must begin to wrestle with some of these fundamental contradictions and offer strategies for their resolution.



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