Community-Based Research Toolkit

2019 Pilot Report

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CONTENTS

REPORT

APPENDICES

SUMMARY

During the Spring 2018 semester, I served as a Center for Community Engagement Faculty Fellow and oversaw a pilot community-based participatory action research project. I hand selected five students to serve as research assistants who had completed my Qualitative Research Methods course and indicated interest in going to graduate school or pursuing careers in research. Despite being a small group, the students reflected the diversity of our campus and our department.

Working with the Long Beach-based California Conference for Equality and Justice (CCEJ), we developed a study to focus on the impacts of their Building Bridges camps. As one of their flagship programs, the 3-day camps are designed to provide high school-aged youth with an introduction to oppressive structures in society and the pursuit of social justice. Our study entailed holding interviews and focus groups with former camp participants to learn about what they took away from the


experience and where life had taken them. As a community-based participatory action research project, CCEJ was involved at every stage of the process. The ultimate goal was to offer the organization with participant insights that may help in enhancing Building Bridges programs. This toolkit is meant to focus on the reflections, tools, and other resources that we developed over the course of the project. As a result, this document does not constitute a report of our research findings. While future publications are in the works on the outcomes of the project, we hope you find this toolkit useful when developing your own community-based research projects.

Esa Syeed
Department of Sociology

WHAT IS COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH?

Participatory action research, or PAR, is an approach to research that seeks alternatives to normative ideas of what "science" or "research" should look like.
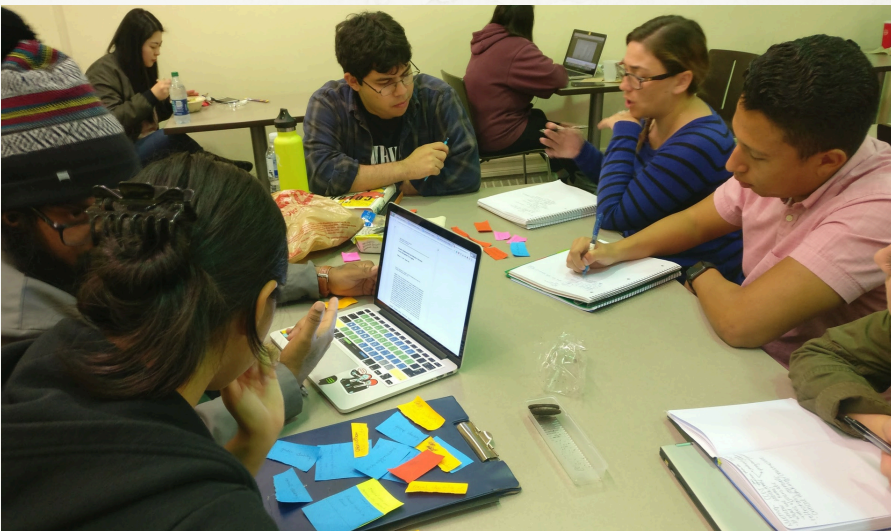
Given the dynamic nature of the approach, there is not a simple checklist for whether or not something constitutes PAR. Rather, there are critical questions and relationships that researchers must explore in partnership with the communities they work with. PAR, then, is not a method in and of itself. Utilized and adapted across various disciplines, PAR can take on many different forms or methods.

With an emphasis on community-driven inquiry directed towards social justice, PAR is a powerful approach commonly adopted in university-community partnerships.

For those of us who may be new to PAR, the first step is to unpack our own assumptions about research and our role within it. As you will see, PAR requires constant reflection from beginning to end.

The Public Science Project, a community and social justice-focused research center, writes that PAR

"provides a critical framework for making science – systematic inquiry and analysis – a public enterprise. Allied with feminist, critical race, and indigenous theory, PAR is an approach to research that values the significant knowledge people hold about their lives and experiences. PAR positions those most intimately impacted by research as leaders in shaping research questions, framing interpretations, and designing meaningful research products and actions."

Additional PAR resources are included in the appendix.

SUCCESSES, CHALLENGES, & SUGGESTIONS

This section offers reflections on important aspects of our process that outlines some successes, potential challenges, and suggestions for future community-based and participatory research work. The following sections are organized according to the resources found in the appendices below.

A. PARTNER RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING

Developing a relationship with a community partner takes time and various forms of engagement from the university partner. Months before beginning the project, I had met with the partner organization to brainstorm potential areas for collaboration. Afterwards, I attended one of their workshops and continued our conversation. When the possibility of working as a Faculty Fellow arose, I had already completed the initial relationship groundwork. In our initial planning meetings, we were very upfront about our what we hoped to take away from the project with and our respective capacities to carry it out. Over the course of the project, students were able to attend special events hosted by the partner organization and were able to get a better sense of their broader work in the community.

Key "pieces" to developing an effective community-based research partnership:

Take your time and really get to know your partner/staff

Craft a partnership agreement that addresses all aspects of the research process

Attend or volunteer at partner events outside of the project

Invite your partner to campus for meetings, lunch/coffee, to be guest speakers, etc.

Utilize shared folders/documents to increase transparency

B. PLANNING & PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Institutional demands and student flexibility. The major challenge of our project proved to be one common to many research studies: participant recruitment. As a result, we had to introduce additional recruitment methods and also had to submit amendments to the IRB application. Our ability to be nimble to address these issues relied heavily on my established relationship with a small group of highly engaged students. Managing such complications within a larger group context or a traditional classroom may pose a unique challenge.

The unpredictability of research means having a Plan B (and even C, D, E…) on hand. While we adapted the project over time to address challenges that arose, we did it on the fly.

For those developing community-based research projects, it would be useful to spell out specific contingency plans with the partner organization and student researchers from the start. At the same time, faculty leading such projects should also guarantee that students and partners have realistic expectations of what community-based research entails and its potential shortcomings.

Regular meetings and building community. The ups and downs of the research process mean that there are natural lulls in the research process. We met consistently over the course of the semester and utilized those lull periods to explore literature on our topic. Meetings were held in the CCE conference room, an ideal collaborative meeting space. With snacks and regular-check-ins, the meetings were also an opportunity for us to build community with one another. Group meetings may also serve as a useful time for students to become more acquainted with CCE or other on-campus resources/institutions, such as the IRB.

Intentional documentation. In our attempts to make everything transparent, we created several files to document our process. While useful in record-keeping and sharing our progress, it at times became challenging to consistently update everything. Students were delegated to take notes at meetings on a revolving basis.

C. STUDENT IMPACT

In their reflections on the process, students were asked to share what they gained from the process and suggestions for other courses/faculty in the future. Below is a summary of some of the key themes from their responses.

Personal and professional growth. On an individual level, students found that the project helped them explore careers in research and allowed them to feel a sense of empowerment and affirmation in their abilities. Faculty developing similar projects may also consider what individual, student-level outcomes may be relevant to their projects.

"I learned how to work with a team in a setting that is not the classroom....The experience of being a part of a project like this is incomparable and provides that first-hand experience that can really set a foundation for people interested in research.... "

[Community-based research] allows for students to be exposed and eventually network different avenues different from the school setting. I think there is a lot more to gain when being able to be able to learn and apply these critical thinking skills and methods outside the classroom."

"This project has helped me know my worth and allowed me to set bigger goals for myself... I made connections, friends, and learned that I'm capable of being more than a student."

Deepening community connections. The project also provided students an introduction to community groups and issues. Developing the partnership plan and agreement is an important and iterative part of the process of community-based research.

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Learning applications. Getting to take their learning outside the classroom, students also commented that the project helped them bridge theory and practice. While theory did at times inform our work, I also wanted students to be open to new possibilities and understandings gained from the field. Faculty may consider how to best bridge what students are learning in the classroom and the field.

"*After being at the school for about a year and a half—mostly reading sociological theory—it was really nice to engage with learning in a different way...*"

"*I was able to do research outside of a school assignment, research that wasn't just for a grade, but for experience and practice. To be honest, before I took qualitative research methods last semester, I would tell you that I absolutely hated doing research; but, this process has shown me that there is more to research than reading a lot of peer reviewed articles and losing sleep over worrying about turning in a paper I'm never going to think about again when I'm done with it.*"

Student participation. Given the limited opportunities to participate in research, students advocated for more such opportunities to be created. However, at the same time, they also recognized that such opportunities are often reserved for the highest performing students. Additionally, students commented on their ability to manage working on a research project along with other school, work, and general life commitments. As a campus, we may consider how to make community-based research more accessible to our students.

"*One major thing that I think should be taken into consideration is promoting the opportunities to conduct community-based research projects at CSULB.... I mean, yes still have students learn these tools [in their courses] to be properly equipped, but also maybe offer classes being able to do community-based research besides opportunities only given to honors students.*"

"*This semester I juggled keeping my head above water with school and assignments, keeping up with grading papers for my TA position, being a research assistant, and still working 25–30 hours a week. I was able to prove to myself that I am capable of these things as long as I have the will and drive to keep going. Although, I'll be honest, I don't think I'll take on this much at once again.*"

DOCUMENT #1: SAMPLE RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT
The agreement is meant to focus on a particular project and would not substitute the broader partnership agreement with CCE.

Research Partnership Agreement
Between

Community Partner

and

CSULB Professor/Department

BACKGROUND
- This agreement sets forth the guiding values that the Partner groups share, their respective roles/responsibilities, and relevant aspects of the overall process.

SHARED VALUES
The Partners agree to work collaboratively on a research project guided by the following shared values and perspectives:

- Equity and democracy. We believe research is most effective when guided by communities. As such, we expect that all Partners will take an active role at each step of the process. Consensus-based decision-making and transparency will ensure that Partners' voices are heard.
- Shared accountability. We believe that each Partner brings unique knowledge, skills, and experiences to the project and that each stands to benefit in unique ways. To realize these possibilities, we will refine the roles that each Partner plays to ensure that the process values and welcomes their contributions. At the same time, we recognize the organic nature of this process and are prepared to be flexible and accommodating to changes beyond our control.
- Action. Central to the project is a belief that research can support social justice. Collectively, the Partners will work together to determine appropriate action-oriented outcomes.

ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES
These roles have been developed to maximize the contributions of each Partner and to acknowledge those responsibilities that we share. Furthermore, we acknowledge the limitations of our capacity and have attempted to craft roles that are feasible and do not present an undue burden to any of the Partners.

Community Partner Role/Responsibility	Shared Responsibilities	University Partner Role/Responsibility
● Provide key experiential knowledge to the development of the research project ● Identify research participants. ● Provide incentives, food, and space for hosting focus groups or other research-based activities.	● Make efforts to build relationships ● Respond to project-related communications within 1 day ● Document the process to support future community-based research partnerships. ● Act as "critical friends" to ensure that all voices are heard through the process and that we all abide by our agreement.	● Provide research expertise and facilitate planning ● Ensure that the community partner is informed of progress on the project. ● Provide opportunities to build the capacity of the partner organization.

PROCESS

The research partnership will last between December 2017 and April 2018. Documentation of the process and meeting notes can be found here (you can include a link to meeting notes)

Meetings
- Meetings will be held at both the Community Partner's office and on CSULB campus to allow for Partners to build closer ties
- Meetings will be scheduled on an as-needed basis and will only occur when clear objectives and potential outcomes are communicated between the Partners.

Data
- All Partners may be present for data collection unless otherwise discussed (ie focus groups, interviews, etc.)
- De-identified transcripts of focus groups/interviews will be provided to the Community Partner for their own use.

Participant rights
- The Partners will work together to ensure that language is used to inform participants about their rights as research participants and to minimize any discomforts they may face.

Dissemination
- The Partners will come to agreement on how to best present and disseminate the research findings to the Community Partner, participants, and the wider community.

- The CSULB Partner may also utilize data for academic publications beyond the research partnership. However, the Community Partner will be given the opportunity to review such writings before they are submitted for publication.

Resource Allocation
- The Community Partner agrees to cover participant incentives, food, and hosting costs associated with the data collection.
- The CSULB Partner will provide in-kind services and cover the research costs associated with data analysis/collection (transcription services, coding programming, etc.)

DOCUMENT #2: SAMPLE PROCESS DOCUMENT

Below is a sample entry from our ongoing documentation of the process kept on a Google Doc to easily be shared and updated over the course of the project. Utilizing shared documents ensured transparency for our community partner and helped keep us accountable in our work. To facilitate these initial meetings, we used the 'PAR Map' (Appendix B) as a guide to answering important questions like, "Whom does the research want to reach, educate, provoke to action?" and "What is the purpose of the research?".

Community Partner + CSULB Research Partnership: Process Notes

This document will serve as a space for recording developments on the process of developing our research partnership and executing our project. Partners (including relevant Community Partner Staff, CSULB faculty/staff and students, and Center for Community Engagement staff), may reference and comment on this document to seek clarification or offer feedback. The document will offer transparency and keep us accountable by assigning follow-up actions to various stakeholders. Finally, this can be used as a reference to inform future research/community partnerships.

MEETING DATE: 11/29/17	PARTICIPANTS: Daniel, Esa, Juan, Carmen
OBJECTIVES: ● Determine a research topic/direction ● Begin determining roles and guidelines for involvement between partners	
NOTES: What is the research topic? We settled on looking at the impact of the Building Bridges (BB) programs on youth participants. Understanding how the program may shape general outlooks, educational/career choices, etc. will support CCEJ in refining their programming. CCEJ is also developing alumni outreach activities, and this research may inform these strategies. What will be the approach? We discussed using Participatory Action Research as a framework for our approach. Using the PAR map to inform our discussion, we discussed shared values and practical issues like who will own the data, the extent to which CCEJ wants to be engaged at each stage of the process, and who the audience of the research would be. The products of the research will include a report for CCEJ and potential academic publications. The sample will include BB participants who are 18+ and who completed the program since 2014 (when the new version of the program was introduced).	

Focus groups were discussed as an appropriate method because it would help elicit communal experiences of the program and also reflects the circle discussions BB participants are familiar with. Logistically, it may also be easier to coordinate. Tentatively, we expect to conduct at least 3 focus groups of 15 participants max. CCEJ has agreed to host them at their office and provide food and incentives (gift cards) to participants. We may also explore alternative data-collection methods as well.

Documenting the process
Juan stopped by to help provide some context for CCE's involvement and the need to document the process to help inform future research partnerships. Carmen also discussed the partnership agreement forms that will be needed to establish an official partnership with CCEJ.

What do we need to figure out?
Can CSULB partners visit a camp or at least a training to learn more about the program?

What should our research partnership agreement look like?

What is the best way to document the process?

Proposed timeline:
Dec - Jan: Planning

Mid-Jan- Feb: Focus groups (Data collection)

Mar: Analysis

Early April: Presentation of findings

FOLLOW-UP
- Send a copy of Building Bridges Curriculum to Esa/Add to the Drive folder (Daniel)
- Schedule a "Think Aloud" session with CCEJ staff for Dec/Jan (Daniel)
- Fill out CCE partnership forms (Daniel)
- Draft a partner agreement with CCEJ (Esa)
- Develop some documentation system (Esa)
- Look for any existing partnership agreements/MOUs that CCEJ may already have (Daniel)

APPENDIX B: PLANNING AND PROJECT MANAGEMENT

DOCUMENT #1: SAMPLE TIMELINE AND ACCOUNTABILITY SHEET

This was a helpful resource when dividing up the work between our small research team, especially as several new tasks needed to be added along the way. It also helped students feel more accountable to one another and the group as a whole.

STAGE	DATES	TASK	ASSIGNED / COMPLETED					
			Professor	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Student 5
PLANNING	Dec 11 - 17	Attend partner mtg 12/14						
		Prepare initial draft of focus group questions						
	Dec 18 - 24	Provide feedback on focus group questions 12/18						
		Send draft version back to Community Partner						
	Jan 8 - 14	Begin IRB Application						
		Draft a consent form						
		Finalize FG protocol with Community Partner						
	Jan 15 - 21	Share IRB app with Community Partner						
		Receive IRB approval						
		Initial literature review: find 3 articles memo						
		Prepare focus group materials (sign-in sheets, etc.)						
		Research transcription services						
	3/12/2018	Recruitment calls						
	Mar 20 - 23	Last set of recruitment calls						
DATA COLLECTION	Mar 15	Focus group 1						
	Mar 20	Focus group 2						
	Mar 24	Focus Group 3						
	Mar 26	Send out for FG transcripts						
		Follow-up interviews						
ANALYSIS		Coding						
		Coding						
		Findings/analysis meeting						
		Report back mtg w/Community Partner						
REPORTING		Develop initial report						
		Report back mtg w/Community Partner						
		Revise and provide final draft of report						

DOCUMENT #2: ADDITIONAL PLANNING RESOURCES

Research centers and online resources

- [The Public Science Project.](#) Based at CUNY, the center offers workshops/trainings, documentation of their projects, and is a thought leader in participatory action research.

- The [PAR Map](#), developed by Maria Torre, is a simple but useful guiding document when planning with your research partner.

- [Resources for Community-Engaged Research](#). The University of Minnesota site includes templates that are helpful at various stages of the process, including forming partnership agreements.

- [Research for Organizing](#). A valuable resource on connecting research to community organizing with several tools for download.

Published work

- Butin, D. (2010). [Service-Learning in Theory and Practice: The Future of Community Engagement](#).

- Cipolle, S. (2010). [Service-Learning and Social Justice: Engaging Students in Social Change](#).

- Herr, K. & Anderson, G. (2014). [The Action Research Dissertation: A Guide for Students and Faculty](#).

- Strand, K., Cutforth, N., Stoecker, R., Marullo, S., & Donohue, P. (2003). [Community-Based Research and Higher Education: Principles and Practices](#)

<p style="text-align:center"><u>APPENDIX C. STUDENT IMPACT</u></p>

<u>DOCUMENT #1: SAMPLE REFLECTIVE MEMO GUIDELINES</u>

Students completed a set of memos spanning the entire project. They individually shared their own Google Docs with me, allowing me to comment individually on their reflections and provide feedback.

<p style="text-align:center">Student Reflective Memos</p>

The purpose of these memos is to provide opportunities for constant reflection and analysis throughout the qualitative research process. Entries should be about ~150-300 words (though write as much as you want) and these will be shared with me (Prof Syeed) throughout the process. Sections may be confidentially used in reporting to partners or other university stakeholders.

To complete your journal entries, copy and paste the prompts into your own Google Doc and share with me. Please note that the prompts may change slightly and due dates will be announced as we progress through the process.

Pre-study expectations
Entry 1. What do you hope to get out of this project? What are you looking forward to learning?

A. Planning and relationship-building
Entry 2 (Due: 2/9). What are your impressions of the partner organization so far? What would you like to know more about? Are there issues or concerns you think should be addressed?

Entry 3 (Due 2/19). What themes from literature seem like they will be relevant?

B. Data collection
Entry 4 (Due 3/13). What do you expect to hear at the focus groups? How do you feel about facilitating the focus groups?

Entry 5 (Complete after attending each focus group). What did you learn from the focus groups? What sticks out to you? What worked well/what didn't?

Focus group 1 (Date):

Focus group 2 (Date):

C. Analysis

Entry 6 (Due 4/16, 10am). After reviewing the transcripts and coding, what stands out to you? What themes seem to be emerging?

D. Reporting

Entry 7 (Due 4/24). How well does the report seem to reflect findings from the research process? What do you think works about the way we have reported the findings? How could our reporting be improved?

E. Post study debrief

Entry 8 (Due 5/5).

- How do you reflect on our relationship with the organization? Were there aspects of the partnership that could be approached differently in the future? How do you think the research benefits them?

- What do you feel like you have gained through this process? What do you think would have helped you learn more?

- What should other classes/faculty learn from this process? What are important practices or approaches in creating community-based research projects at CSULB?