**Promoting Student Engagement in Community Psychology Through
Participatory Action Research and Problem Based Learning**

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In the field of community intervention and psychological research, there has been considerable emphasis on the process of conducting action research (Jason et al. 2004). As such, curricula for community psychology courses often include intention to provide opportunities for students to understand the process of working in communities. Although having a community-based project itself may promote an understanding of community psychology principles, it may be difficult to ensure full adoption of a community psychology perspective in the confines of a traditional (e.g. lecture-based) classroom. Coupling a class project with non-traditional elements of learning (e.g. discussion-based, empowerment-focused classroom management) may facilitate a broader understanding of the democratic and participatory values of community psychology. The authors hope to provide information from the student and faculty perspective on the process and outcomes of one particular community psychology course, and lessons learned along the way that may inform future teaching and learning.

An introductory community psychology course provided the authors with an understanding of the process involved in promoting change through action research in communities. Participation in a semester-long project in the community psychology course facilitated an understanding of that change process through a community psychology lens. More specifically, by conducting a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project in the student community coupled with elements of Problem Based Learning (PBL) in the classroom, students experienced a deep understanding of the theory and practice of community psychology.

PBL was introduced in medical schools in the 1980's, and has since been applied widely in other areas of instruction. One element of PBL involves a meaningful shift in the way that the instructor interacts with the students. Traditional lecture-based classrooms designate the instructor as knowledge-bearer. If students leave the classroom and assume the role of knowledge bearer in community settings, they may disempower the community stakeholders with whom they wish to collaborate. The use of PBL in the community capstone course shifted students' understanding of how to approach change. The instructor acted as a discussant, allowing a higher percentage of the students to participate and take the lead in various tasks. This shift in classroom hierarchy proved useful to students' ability to understand democratic participation, and its role in promoting change in community settings.

The course project also incorporated elements of PAR to engage students in the course, as well as other stakeholders (e.g. other students, faculty, and administrators). One element of PAR involves incorporation of evaluation (Wandersman et al. 2004). Students took ownership of the classroom experience when evaluation and democratic decision-making were paired with more traditional elements of learning (i.e. memory-based learning). The authors examined key elements of the context in which the course was offered in order to better understand why this greater ownership occurred.

The Class

Miami University defines a capstone course as the merging and application of skills acquired during one's undergraduate years. The community psychology capstone challenges students to draw upon previous coursework in psychology and apply them in novel contexts. The premise of the community capstone course is to define a community, identify a problem or concern facing the community, and to create a project that has an impact on that concern. Students in this class are encouraged to engage in meaningful participatory discussion by defining the community in which they learn and live. The instructor employs a problem-based teaching style, a pedagogical approach that differs from most other classroom styles. For example, the instructor might apply course material in real-time to a semester-long project, or decentralize authority in a way that gives the students an increased level of decision-making power regarding many elements of the class.

The authors were a part of one particular class that shared a uniquely meaningful semester where the outcome of the class warranted further study. In the class, the 20 students were primarily psychology majors in their final year at Miami University. The instructor was a tenure-track faculty member with a Clinical-Community Psychology and Evaluation background.

The structure and fundamental elements of the class project were outlined in the syllabus. Students were required to take four exams that accounted for 30% of their final grade. They were required to identify a specific problem within their community. They were required to submit a written product based on their project and were required to participate in self and peer evaluation. The instructor negotiated every other detail of the syllabus with the class.

Class met three times per week for one hour. Two classes per week were dedicated to the project; the third day was dedicated to content in community psychology. Students learned about community psychology content through student presentations. After the instructor modeled several topics and techniques, students chose a topic (e.g., Human Ecology, Prevention and Promotion, Self-Help and Mutual Support) and decided how to teach the material. The role of the instructor was to clarify content, to encourage deeper discussion of the material, and to help apply community psychology content to the PAR project.

The class project was structured as follows: early in the semester, students were asked to identify several problems they saw within their community. The parameters of the perceived "problems" and "community" were defined by the students. Students defined the "community" as the university setting so that students and the instructor could be viewed as stakeholders in the project. Student ideas about community "problems" were written anonymously on note cards, gathered during class, written out on the chalkboard, and voted on. As a result of this democratic decision-making process, students chose the topic of first-year adjustment and awareness of campus mental health services. Once this problem was identified, students engaged in a process of generating deeper understanding of the problem through exploring perspectives of other stakeholders (e.g., campus police, student mental health providers), relevant literature regarding mental health on college campuses, and qualitative and quantitative study of awareness of mental

health services. During this process, each student was encouraged by the instructor to identify and use their particular talents, skills, and connections within the community.

Evaluation

The use of evaluation, which can be empowering in certain contexts (Wandersman et al. 2004), became a central ingredient for the class. There were multiple opportunities for evaluation, both inside and outside of the classroom. Students completed self and peer evaluations four times during the semester. Each student evaluated themselves and two randomly assigned peers on four criteria: Attendance, Quality of Work Produced, Cooperation with Team, and Contribution to Effort. In addition, the instructor collected feedback regularly from students about the project topic, the class process, and progress towards class and project goals. The results of these informal evaluations were anonymous and provided an opportunity for the instructor to gauge class climate and make mid-course corrections.

During this course, the instructor found that the students were willing to hold themselves and each other accountable. Self and peer evaluations were surprisingly modest and candid. Students were willing to evaluate themselves and each other consistent with their actual performance. It is possible that students in this class did so because of their desire to produce a quality product or to have an impact on their community. Thus, the willingness to critique self and others presents some evidence of buy-in for the project. Having a "community", or in this case a class, take ownership (Argyris, 1970) and increase capacity for learning and motivation for achieving goals, is putting into practice the goals of community psychologists.

Democratic Participation

In this capstone course, students participated in virtually every class decision. Students chose tasks, set deadlines, determined the methods for gathering data, which groups they wanted to be in, and who would lead each task-group. The instructor facilitated the students' knowledge of their own resources and ability to understand and apply the material. The students also had considerable power to choose exam dates.

At first, students had trouble adjusting to this greater ownership of class decision-making. Several students would question the process of selecting a topic of study before and after class, and why it was so important to get every single student to participate and play a role. After all, some students are hesitant to speak up. However, it is possible that the greater sense of choice and call for participation made students more accountable and motivated to create a final product of which they took ownership. By taking this measured risk of allowing students the opportunity to have more power over decisions made, there were clear advantages in what students learned. For example, the relationship that students had to the material was more personalized. Instead of the instructor offering applied examples from previous academic work, students molded the way that they learned information based on how it currently applied to the project and to their university context. Another clear advantage of this style of teaching was that multiple aspects of the class determined final grades. It is possible that acknowledging the importance of participation in the grading scheme encouraged students to engage meaningfully in the democratic decision-making process.

Conclusion

At the end of the semester, the students were able to offer constructive feedback and consultation to the university community. The students presented their perspective as well as data from first-year students to validate a hypothesized trend for first-year adjustment and on-campus mental health service awareness. By engaging in conversations with key stakeholders, the students left the class with a sense of accomplishment, knowing that their work was a stepping-stone for future conversations about how to improve the university community. This was an exciting accomplishment for students when compared to the usual end-of-semester distribution of success based solely on grades. The relationships formed and the professional skills developed were an unexpected positive return from the process of engagement in a PAR project paired with PBL.

Conducting a PAR project and incorporating elements of PBL allowed students to leave with a deep understanding of the theory and practice of community psychology. Reflecting on and replicating the structure and elements of this course may allow future community psychology instructors to recognize the importance of modeling community collaboration within the context of the classroom. The use of evaluation and critical reflection throughout the course led to a sense of responsibility, meaningful participation, and engagement. Pairing the ingredients above with more traditional elements of a classroom, such as lectures and examinations, students exhibited more evidence of having learned and adopted values and skills of community psychologists.

References

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