Participatory Action Research and the University Classroom

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The purpose of this chapter is to explore a feminist-informed participatory action research project in which DePaul University faculty, students in undergraduate classes, and community members have collaborated to address issues of social policy, advocacy, and community development. The project, "Teen Girls Re-Vision East Rogers Park," focused on life narrative interviews with a group of teen girls of color from low-income families. All girls were members of a thriving community-based leadership program in the East Rogers Park neighborhood of Chicago.

We aim to accomplish four ends. First, we explore the unique characteristics of a university environment that has facilitated the growth and development of progressive participatory action research. Second, we discuss those qualities that characterize our overall research agenda, with a particular focus on describing our course-based research model. This includes an examination of the ways in which this model differs from a traditional, hierarchical undergraduate classroom structure. Third, we introduce readers to our participatory action research project and offer an analysis of research planning and design. Here we also present a glimpse of our findings and demonstrate the processes through which we created mutually reinforcing synergies among research, teaching, and community engagement. Finally, we articulate a set of reflections on our work as a feminist-informed participatory action research collective.
Positive University Climate

In 2002 the authors of this chapter founded the Women and Gender Research Initiative at DePaul University. This initiative is housed within the Women's and Gender Studies Program. It is designed to promote community-based programs and research that inform the prevention of and intervention in gender-related oppressions. The initiative is committed to documenting, collecting, and making public the contributions of individuals whose lives reflect previously untold experiences and resilience. From 2003–2006 the initiative has developed, funded, and implemented four very successful community-based projects. Each of these projects (one of which is detailed later in this chapter) spurs the development of a curriculum that seeks to educate students in varied research processes. It also provides opportunities to participate in ongoing research projects and integrate those experiences with contextual course content. We strive to take students from content to methods and from academics to the real world of community engagement and grassroots organizing.

Our work has found substantial support at DePaul University, and we believe that DePaul offers a climate that is uniquely conducive to the development of such work. In particular, the vision and academic goals of the Women and Gender Research Initiative articulate well with DePaul's Vincentian purpose and mission. At the center of this mission is a commitment to involve the university deeply in the life of the surrounding urban communities by assisting them in finding solutions to their problems. Furthermore, the Vincentian approach involves a commitment to holistic and integrated educational processes in which we educate the heart as well as the head. The approach blends the humanistic and the professional, the abstract and the practical.

Beyond its Vincentian roots, three other institutions within the DePaul community have been especially valuable in terms of supporting and nurturing our commitment to participatory action projects. First is the Steans Center for Community-based Service Learning, which was founded to integrate the service concept into the university's curricula. At the center of the Steans Center's mission is a commitment to foster, through higher education, a deep respect for the dignity of all persons and to instill in students a dedication to service to others. Not only has the Steans Center supported our work financially, but it has also been instrumental in assisting and supporting the integration of service-learning pedagogy into our work.

Second, we have been fortunate to find a permanent home for many of our research materials in the special collections and archives section of the Richardson Library at DePaul University. The staff of special collections and archives has collaborated with us in many ways, contributing to the rich opportunities DePaul students and community members have had to engage with our participatory action research. These individuals have expanded their traditional services to make these research materials accessible in the present and in the future to all who are interested in learning from them.

Finally, the Women's and Gender Studies Program at DePaul University has been unwavering in their support of our work. Two leaders of the program have spanned the duration of our work, and both have had the vision that gave birth to and then nurtured our participatory action research collaborative. Our program structure and practices differ from more conventional academic institutional structures in a variety of ways, and we believe these differences to be quite positive. For instance, the very nature of the Women's and Gender Studies Program is interdisciplinary. Our faculty members are drawn from disciplines throughout the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. Program faculty members' diverse areas of specialization are widely represented in their teaching, research, and community activism. Additionally, the program has welcomed adjunct faculty members to be full participants. In the case of our research initiative, the strong community ties of one of our founders—an adjunct faculty member—has been vital to the establishment and growth of our work. We were encouraged to explore ways in which our research interests might converge in undergraduate courses to broaden students' exposure to diverse populations and multiple oppressions. We also introduced students to the rigors and rewards of conducting feminist research. Indeed, our program has continually been open to the creation of new courses as well as the adaptation of existing ones. It is designed to integrate participatory action research as central to these curricula.
Overall Research Agenda

Our overall research agenda is to promote multidisciplinary collaborative study in the areas of gender, oppression, and resilience, providing opportunities for mutually reinforcing synergies between research, teaching, and community engagement. Our projects are aimed at working with community members to bring about social change through research that addresses social policy, advocacy, and community development. Toward these ends each research project is directed by a full-time faculty member who collaborates with student researchers to guide their partnership with members of community organizations and institutions. Additionally, we have created a course-based research model that develops curricula to educate students in varied research processes, provides opportunities to participate in ongoing research projects, and integrates those experiences with contextual course content.

Course-Based Research Model

By way of introduction, it is important to articulate the four central theoretical assumptions that underlie our course-based research model. First, our feminist theoretical grounding translates into a commitment to conducting research for and with our community participants, as opposed to conducting research on them (Cook & Fonow, 1990; Thompson, 1992). This feminist-informed research is intended to empower women and challenge inequalities of all kinds. It focuses on topics vital to the community members, gives voice to their experiences, and provides possible directions toward community change. By using our feminist framework, we hoped to ensure that research participants’ priorities informed the project, rather than our own assumptions of what their priorities might or should be.

Second, we value an asset-based model that emphasizes research participants’ strengths and resiliencies rather than the more pervasive deficit model. In the latter, culturally oppressed, marginalized individuals’ experiences are often viewed as deficient in comparison to their more “privileged” counterparts. This does not mean that we fail to explore the complex challenges surrounding research participants’ lives. Rather, we are committed to contextualizing these challenges and examining the social, economic, cultural, and historic forces that embed the participants’ lives.

Third, to ensure that the action research projects are truly meaningful endeavors for the community organizations with which we collaborate, we have chosen to undertake only those projects that have been initiated by community organizations themselves. For instance, in both projects described later in this chapter, grassroots community organizations, with which one of us has had long-standing ties, approached us with requests for help. They each sought university collaboration and qualitative research that would give a wider audience and an enduring presence for the rarely heard voices of their constituents.

Finally, we are committed to an interactive model in which faculty, students, and community organizations participate from beginning to end of each research project. This means that we all collaborate fully in the various stages of research, including determining project design and scope, navigating emergent research focus, reviewing data that are collected and analyzed, shaping the written report, and staging public events at its completion.

With these theoretical assumptions as our basic scaffolding, we then design each participatory action research course so that we can provide ample flexibility to create a unique structure. Our goals are to educate students, expand their knowledge base, and challenge them to explore feminist research methodologies, while engaging with community organizations to meet vital research needs. For example, over the past few years, one of us has included a new focus on a participatory action research project in a lower division undergraduate course that is taught every year. The research project is offered as one of several research options from which students may choose. The other of us has framed an entire undergraduate seminar around an action research project. Students have chosen among varied assignments, all tied to the research. We have also created a new course for upper division undergraduate and graduate students to learn the qualitative research methodology of conducting life narrative research. Participating students are engaged in
activist research with community-based organizations in direct application of these methodological approaches.

Beyond building in course flexibility, there are a variety of additional research issues that need to be negotiated as we implement this course-based research model. Time constraints and students’ lack of prior research training are frequently cited professional concerns that can limit the substantive content of student-focused research (Fine, Torre, Boudin, Bowen, Clark, Hylton, et al., 2004). Indeed, DePaul’s quarterly academic calendar yields 10-week courses, which, in practice, limits direct student involvement in research to approximately eight weeks. To address these concerns, two features have been included in all of our courses. First, each research project is ongoing, spanning several academic years. This requires that the research focus of a particular course in any given quarter be determined by the stage of the ongoing research process. While students learn about the purposes and methodologies of the entire project, their assignments are chosen from the work that remains to be done in the research. Second, all research materials are permanently archived in DePaul’s Richardson Library. This includes individual student research papers, which are viewed as their contributions to the ongoing study, each representing one point of view at one point in time. In these ways, student assignments can transcend the limitations of a single course and a single individual’s grasp of the subject matter by contributing to a larger body of research. Individual work may be valued for what it is: no more and no less than what each student is capable of producing. Moreover, the entire research process need not be compromised in any way by the inadequacies of an individual paper.

Assessment is, of course, an essential part of every course experience. However, it is particularly important in a course that engages students in participatory action research. As others have described, institutions committed to such nontraditional classroom endeavors must be able to demonstrate the impact of these initiatives to ensure quality for student and community participants, to justify resource investments, and to inform the improvement and expansion of such programs (Gelman, Sherman, Gaudet, Mitchell, & Trotter, 2004). We align ourselves with those who hold that there are four primary reasons for assessments. The first is to improve student learning. The second is to provide immediate feedback so program leaders can make incremental changes and respond to identified needs and concerns. The third is to provide a basis for program planning and for redesign and substantive improvement. The fourth is to provide accountability for funding purposes. Additionally, researchers in community-university partnerships have established that such assessments can contribute to ensuring high-quality, enduring relationships among all participants, especially in light of the different concerns and expectations that faculty, students, and community partners may bring to a project. Beyond articulating what has been learned, assessment can also provide an opportunity to celebrate successes that have been achieved and can focus future planning to include new insights gained. Finally, it is vital that assessment outcomes be used to facilitate expansion of this methodology to other faculty, disciplines, and courses. By sharing lessons learned, assessment findings can identify significant factors for others who are considering similar work.

Perceived Strengths of Course-Based Research

In what some may consider an unconventional university classroom environment, as professors, we do not assume the role of chief content expert imparting all significant information. That is, we are not guided by the traditional assumption that the student is the only one who is to learn and the faculty member is the only teacher—one who lectures. Rather, as faculty members, we are the lead researchers and perhaps the primary facilitators of learning. We are engaged in a collaborative learning process in which everyone—faculty, students, and community members—is alternately learning from and teaching one another from their own experiences. The learning process is multifaceted, where students actively create their assignments, conduct research, and explore community needs. They also integrate this new knowledge with course readings, which traditionally have been the principal learning tools in universities.

Indeed, in our classrooms, students are expected to actively engage throughout the course in assignments as well as assessments, which are self- and faculty driven. This ongoing productive and reflective process stands in contrast to the traditional passive learner role that waits for an
external evaluation from the teacher. Unlike most traditional course assignments, which may have little real-world relevance beyond earning course credit, students in research-based courses share in the reality of engaging in social justice-oriented research that has the potential of impacting public policy change. For the many students whom we find want to continue their research past the end of the course, there is the unique possibility for further collaboration with the faculty member, other academic colleagues, library archival research staff, and the community organization with which they have studied.

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Perceived Challenges of Course-Based Research

Typical of most participatory action research courses, ours have demanded greater preparation time, even when repeatedly teaching a class. For instance, when a course begins, students may be unsure what to expect with this different course model and may take longer than in traditional courses to acclimate to their new learning environment. This process often requires greater faculty attention and interaction with individuals and student groups than in traditional classes. Guiding students toward a successful research experience includes helping them select a topic or focus that will be manageable for their research skills and experiential levels. Furthermore, there are substantially more ad hoc adjustments and modifications that are made throughout an individual course, based on class and research progress. Such adjustments are likely to include ongoing communications with the participating community organization. This typically requires a significant time commitment and negotiation of scheduling details.

An additional challenge that we have navigated in several of our courses involves the special ethical concerns that present themselves when undergraduate students are involved in research with vulnerable populations. We take seriously our commitment to conduct ethical research and our obligation to protect the rights and needs of our so-called subjects. We also take seriously our commitment to providing a full and robust educational experience for our undergraduate students. On occasion, these two commitments may be in tension, because relatively inexperi-

enced and unprepared undergraduate researchers involve themselves in community-based projects. We are mindful of the challenge this tension presents and continuously strive to be creative and resourceful in maximizing our ability to deliver on our dual commitments.

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Participatory Action Research Exemplar: Teen Girls Re-Vision East Rogers Park

When we began this research project, we hoped it would enhance the empowerment of a group of urban teen girls of color from low-income families who were members of a teen leadership program at Family Matters, a community organization in the East Rogers Park neighborhood of Chicago. A brightly colored banner welcomes all who enter the teen girls' room at Family Matters: "We see the truth... then we speak our minds." This message was just the reason we were there.

The teen girls from Family Matters were originally prompted to forge their collaboration with us after they completed a community action project that led to some unintended negative consequences. When the teens looked for community background information for this action project, they were stunned by the absence of any public collection of photographs or written history about people of color in East Rogers Park. Additionally, they were offended by the descriptions of their neighborhood that were posted on various web sites. They were appalled by and resisted perspectives that characterized their local streets as full of danger emanating from crime, drugs, prostitution, or from poor immigrants and people of color. Those negative images demeaned streets they saw as far from mean. They saw those views as incomplete stereotypes excluding diverse individuals whom they knew as neighbors, relatives, friends, role models, and mentors. They also strongly felt that such negative stereotypes most certainly did not apply to them. So a project that had started as a learning tool for youth leadership ultimately left these youth feeling disempowered, invisible, and voiceless.

The director of the teen girls' program approached one of us, with whom she has had long-standing professional ties, and asked if there was a way to help the teens express their own perspectives. She said she hoped
that by collaborating with us and our university students, the girls might continue their powerful learning and sharing with others. Thus, as faculty members in the Women’s and Gender Studies Program at DePaul University, we came to plan with these young women ways to give voice to their experiences and views. They lived in a gentrifying neighborhood and were facing a host of age-, family-, and community-related issues. We also sought ways to connect the teens with our DePaul University students in two of our undergraduate courses. They designed a life narrative project in which the teens would be interviewed and their words developed into a published text, giving voice to their own stories to be shared with the community. We hoped that through this process, our students would increase their awareness of a central objective of feminist participatory action research: that the complexity of diversity issues and interlocking oppressions of sexism, racism, and classism can profoundly impact the lives of real young women in their own urban community.

We chose the telling of the teens’ stories as the form of our research, a methodology that is grounded in the feminist belief that life narratives are central to the existence of social life (Thompson, 2000). The details of their narratives may be contradictory, Thompson maintains, but that does not make them right or wrong. The teens’ views and experiences are not put forth as being representative of a universal social life. Yet these narratives have real value to the tellers and their listeners. The narrative process involved the active participation of the teens as they constructed ways of describing and accounting for themselves to their listeners and readers.

Life narratives have a significant place in feminist research. As social science researcher Annette Kuhn (1985) argues, telling stories is central to constructing self-identity, although the memories included in such stories are personal, the connections they make transcend the individual teller. These stories create a record of the lives of marginalized women, capturing their ways of knowing and seeing the world.

Grounded in our feminist research approach, we have been committed to conducting research for and with these teen girls, as opposed to conducting research on them (Cook & Fonow, 1990; Thompson, 1992). This project focused on topics vital to the teens’ lives, giving voice to their experiences and providing possible directions toward community change. At the same time, we have been keenly aware of the importance of the relationship between ourselves and our young participants. Rather than exploit their stories based on power inherent in the position of university researchers, we sought to strike a balance among us. We recognized that the teens’ voices must be clearly communicated on the written page. We hoped this would ensure that the teens’ priorities stood out, rather than the priorities that we might have presumed were, or should be, those of adolescent females. Additionally, it was critical that the teens realized they were perceived by others as collaborators—rather than objects—in this research process.

As we have faced these challenges, we have also benefited from prior exploration of these issues by other feminist researchers. They, too, have struggled to find ways to interpret the voices of their interviewees. In such studies, it is the researcher who ultimately must provide some framework for understanding the views and stories of the participants. Final responsibility for analyzing their stories must also remain with the researcher. Three guidelines emerged from our exploration of the literature: first, engage in ongoing collaboration with the interviewees as their stories and views are analyzed (Gluck & Patai, 1991); second, continually reflect on our own position as it affects our understanding and research process (Franz & Stewart, 1994); and third, realize that no one source of knowledge provides a complete picture (Sollie & Leslie, 1994).

We met with the teen girls several times before our university courses began, planning with them the design of the research project and the focus of the interview questions. As an introduction for our students, we embedded background information about the teen girls’ program in an extended contextual essay about the project and a brief history of this often transitioning neighborhood.

Early in our courses, we explored the topics of privilege and many ways that it presents in society as well as within our own classrooms. We examined prevalent biases and stereotypes about teen girls, their experiences, families, schools, and neighborhoods. Then we explored our own expectations, attitudes, fears, and hopes about engaging these teen girls and this project. In small group exercises, we analyzed our multiple identities and myriad ways in which we all differ from others. We then read and discussed ways to overcome some barriers separating individuals and cultural, economic, and racial/ethnic groups. We also considered methods
of building bridges across those divides, seeking commonalities, and the merits of attempting such an undertaking. As the final step in this initiation phase of our courses, each student was given an assignment to write a three- to five-page paper titled "Who Am I?" The papers were to be written as a hypothetical introduction to the group of teen girls in our research project, indicating ways in which our students might self-identify their place or position in terms of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. They also examined their traits, characteristics, preferences, and experiences that could accurately portray themselves as unique individuals. We hope that writing a paper such as this one provided students with the opportunity to consider the biases and assumptions that they may bring to our research project.

Our students eagerly engaged in the project and provided invaluable insights. For example, as they worked in small groups to critique our interview protocol, they soon identified a bridge to the teen girls. They were only a few years older than the teen participants, ranging in age from 18 to 22 years old, and this likeness helped us as we considered vital issues of creating rapport. Indeed, their suggestions about approachable words and phrases allowed us to relate more easily to the teens. In addition they read transcript excerpts and articulated emerging themes. In readings and discussions, they explored particular risks that the teens might be exposed to. At the same time, however, they became critical analysts in rejecting generalized assumptions about the "victim" image that many readings confer when portraying low-income urban girls of color. Our students became advocates for these teens, wanting the best for them and wishing they could continue with us on the project as the courses ended.

As the school year wound down, we all began to think about the next stages of the project. We hired two of the teen girls as interns over the summer to serve as research advisors on the project. They planned with us the publication of the research report and public events at the completion of the project the following spring. Each week they read text excerpts and advised on whether the teens' voices were coming through accurately. They met with the university publications staff to choose layout, color, and text designs and learned simple ways to convert narratives into dramatic presentations from another faculty member who specializes in dramaturgy. They attended a social justice legacy exhibit celebrating the lives of a group of Chicago women leaders. They took rolls of photos, collected poetry written by their peers, and wrote some of their own. They toured DePaul's Richardson Library archives and saw where their materials would be permanently stored (near artifacts related to Napoleon and Charles Dickens). The following year, the teen girls and their families and friends joined the DePaul faculty and students and members of their neighborhood and the DePaul communities at a press conference on the research report. The teens also presented a dramatic performance to celebrate the publication.

From the inception of this project, we were committed to creating visibility for these teen girls' insights and perspectives. The publication of our research monograph and the live dramatic performance were designed to communicate our main research findings to a broader public. A glimpse of these findings indicates that several themes were particularly prominent in these girls' lives. First, we saw paradoxical perspectives emerge as the teens talked about their community. Their narratives were often layered with ambivalence, complexities, and contradictions. The teens recognized the dangers in their neighborhood, yet they also voiced a strong sense of pride as well the opinion, "this is my community."

A second prominent theme involved street safety. Specifically, we saw that the teen girls viewed sexual harassment, both verbal and physical, on the street as normal everyday interactions, although they said they were frustrating, annoying, and sometimes frightening. The teen girls also decried what they saw as a lack of serious attention paid by the police to these matters. All of these incidents have been repeated frequently in public, in clear sight, and within earshot of other adults who do not stop these behaviors. As a result, the teens have come to view these offenses as virtually unstoppable.

Third, the teen girls' interviews showed a deep concern about the gentrification of East Rogers Park. Many of the teens' families, friends, and neighbors have been displaced while they search—often unsuccessfully—to find a new way to stay in their rapidly changing neighborhood. Furthermore, the teens were very troubled that many low-income families seemed forced to confront these unsought challenges in isolation.
When talking about school and friends, we saw that these teen girls are smart, committed, and hard working. We also saw that there is a real risk of their losing that focus in the absence of institutional supports. Their primary concerns revolved around peer-related issues. For instance, classroom behavioral disruptions, bullying, and peer violence were primary concerns. Moreover, friendships—with other girls and with boys—were often complex and troubling to many of the teen girls.

Finally, and of particular note, we concluded that our work with these teens dispels the view—perpetuated in our culture and in social science research—of the pathological single-parent family headed by a woman. These girls’ descriptions of their families broke the stereotypes. Although the families were by no means perfect, the girls’ descriptions were characterized by love, support, and commitment. Moreover, we were impressed with the active presence of positive male figures even in the absence of live-in biological fathers. We saw and heard many examples of the general need of every family to have multiple external supports.

Reflections, Conclusions, and Future Considerations

After reflecting on the last several years of integrating feminist-informed participatory action research projects into our courses, several insights have emerged that are particularly valuable in terms of considering future research and course development. As an initial matter, we recognize that a scholarly focus on participatory action and community-based work is still not considered mainstream at many universities in terms of professional evaluations and assessments. Moreover, and of particular importance, we also recognize that the type of collegial collaborations that we have forged are not always encouraged in traditional academic structures. That being said, we have found our fully developed professional collaborations enormously productive and enriching. For instance, our collaboration with the special collections and archives section of the Richardson Library at DePaul University has created rich opportunities for students and faculty members. The library staff has a unique knowledge base and innovative research skills that help to make research materials accessible and useful. Additionally, it is rare for two faculty members to have the opportunity to work so closely together on joint projects over such an extended time period. Our experience has convinced us that this type of partnership greatly enhances our work and lives.

The project discussed in this chapter has prompted continued reflection about how to best accommodate the different levels of preparation that students bring to our classrooms. We are mindful of the need to effectively assess students’ skill levels in qualitative research and also to work diligently to help students shape specific research tasks. In addition, we are committed to meeting the challenge of ensuring a successful educational experience for students and of developing a research project that upholds high quality and rigorous scientific standards.

Our commitment to the community-based model translates into action research projects in which organizational investment and “ownership” are critical. Indeed, most of the projects we have chosen to undertake are those that have been initiated by the community organizations themselves. The project discussed in this chapter resulted from an organization that sought collaboration with our university to give a wider voice to their organizational constituency. As we reflect on future projects, we recognize that our commitment to a community-based action research model may take on several different forms and that the initiation process will likely vary.

For example, one of our current projects falls squarely within such a community-initiated model. The Illinois Coalition Against Domestic Violence (ICADV)—one of the oldest and largest statewide coalitions dedicated to eliminating domestic violence—contacted us to seek out an Illinois academic institution to help them conduct an oral history of their organization. The two of us share professional backgrounds that specialize in analyzing domestic violence issues, conducting oral history research, and writing about women activists. We therefore agreed that this project sounded intriguing and began work. Students, faculty, and ICADV members are currently working together to create oral history interviews with founding members. They are also researching the collection of files that document the history of this organization within the broader context of the statewide and national struggle against domestic violence during the decades of ICADV’s existence (1978–present). These historical records, along with transcripts and tapes of the oral history
interviews, will be permanently archived in DePaul University's Richardson Library Special Collections and Archives.

Another project, developed somewhat differently, focuses on prevention of relationship violence among teens and grew out of our collaboration with domestic violence activists in the Chicago community. Working with community activists, we needed to generate interest on the part of the Chicago Public Schools, discussing with them how a partnership with DePaul University would be beneficial to the students and families in their communities. We collaborated with faculty and administrators from a variety of Chicago Public High Schools and discussed the benefits of a program that included service, learning, and research components in which DePaul University would partner with schools to create opportunities for teens. The goals are to increase teens' awareness and understanding of the types of relationship violence and to practice and observe actual relationship dynamics and interactions. The program aims to expand their exposure to sources of assistance in school and the community and to enhance their own empowerment by advocating for healthy, safe relationships and by forming a community action project.

As we reflect upon the work we have done, we recognize the various ways in which we carve out distinct participatory action research projects, as well as the specific forms they take in our university classrooms. We are also mindful that our work clearly builds upon the work of numerous others yet simultaneously strikes out in unique ways. And as is perhaps best reflected in the distinct manner in which each project got underway, each individual project presents unique opportunities and challenges that we are committed to negotiating within our feminist-informed research collective.

References


