

“I just want to help people, why do I need research methods?”:

Community-based Research with Human Service Majors

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Abstract

Universities are increasingly using community-based research as a means to reconnect academic institutions with surrounding communities. The argument is made that human service programs, along with other service-oriented disciplines such as psychology and sociology, are well qualified to incorporate community needs into research courses due to existing relationships developed while students are in field-based courses. Human service programs are representative of a trend in higher education which emphasizes community/school partnerships. Community-based research allows students to make clear linkages between the relevance of research to practice and communities; an important outcome of research methods courses since students often struggle to make sense of research as it relates to helping others. This article describes the integration of a community-based research project into a human service research course. Effects on student learning and the participating community agency are included. Lessons drawn from the project of interest are generalized to other disciplines.

Over the past several years, institutions of higher learning have demonstrated growing support for community-based research (CBR) (Polyani & Cockburn, 2003; Sclove, 1997). This is based, in part, on the concern that college graduates were not civically engaged with their communities or interested in social change (Willis, Peresie, Waldref, & Stockmann, 2003). CBR provides an opportunity for community and university partnering focused on addressing a community-identified problem thereby creating a structured interaction between students and the community. Stoecker (2003) emphasizes the importance of collaboration when engaging in CBR. Contrary to traditional research models, the academic institution does not impose its research agenda on the community. Rather, the community is an equal partner in identifying the problem. Another distinguishing feature of CBR is the focus on social action, not simply knowledge for the sake of knowledge (Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donahue, 2003).

CBR is a form of service-learning with the parallel goals of extending learning beyond the classroom so that students understand the context of community concerns. CBR and service-learning also involve reflection and integration of academic content (Kiser, 2007). In general, service-learning aligns the educational activities of students with those that concentrate on community needs (Kahne & Westmeier, 1996). Human service programs are well versed in the pedagogy of service-learning. The human services major prepares students to understand human problems and to intervene effectively in them by offering a multidisciplinary approach to helping grounded in the social sciences. Students are required to take practice courses which expose them to increasing levels of responsibility in community agencies over the course of their major (Kiser, 2007). Human service majors have experience in the community and are interested in helping others. It follows that integrating CBR into a research methods course would be a natural fit and help students better understand the relevance of research to the field of human service. This article describes the elements of a CBR project integrated into a research methods course for human service majors and the project's influence on student learning.

Research dedicated to the outcomes of students who participate in CBR is limited. However, Chapdelaine and Chapman (1999) report that psychology majors who participated in a CBR project associated with their research methods course had a better understanding of research ethics, found research to be enjoyable, and noted an increased awareness of social issues. Markus, Howard, and King (1993) report that students who participate in more generic applied research experiences demonstrate

better understanding of course material. Similarly, students who participate in faculty-mentored undergraduate research are more likely to attend graduate school (Bauer & Bennett, 2003; Hathaway, Nagda, & Gregerman, 2002; Kremer & Bringle, 1990).

Students are not the only benefactors of CBR. Community agencies can certainly benefit when local academic institutions focus their research resources on a problem. The academic institutions themselves can also benefit from improved partnerships with the surrounding community (Polyani & Cockburn, 2003). Strand and colleagues (2003) argue that it is not uncommon for communities to view the intellectual work of the academy as divorced from real social concerns. CBR is a tool to address the view that academic institutions are elitist and wish to separate campus from community.

There are advantages and disadvantages associated with the integration of CBR into a research methods course. First, CBR requires extensive amounts of faculty time. It is far simpler and less time consuming to teach a standard research methods course that remains in the classroom. Faculty must establish a relationship with community agencies and then nurture that relationship over the course of the project and into the future. Second, CBR requires that universities reconsider the definition of scholarship. The academics' quest for rigor may be at odds with the needs of the community partner (Polyani & Cockburn, 2003). Additionally, partnering with community agency may lengthen a project and delay dissemination of findings. Finally, the consequences of a failed CBR project can have long lasting effects far beyond the end of an academic semester.

Despite the potential pitfalls, the benefits of CBR outweigh the obstacles, especially in the context of service-oriented disciplines such as human services. First, the nature of the curriculum in human service programs is well suited to explore existing relationships with community agencies in order to find suitable research partners. Indeed, it has been my experience that community agencies are eager to embark upon collaborative research, due in part, to the previously established contacts through student internships. Second, CBR offers the opportunity to integrate concepts of social justice into research methods classes that students typically view as a class disconnected to improving someone's life (Stoecker, 2003). Third, as Keyton (2001) notes, students often approach research methods with fear and apprehension, assuming that research methods courses require extensive mathematical calculations. Human service majors are especially wary indicating higher levels of anxiety regarding research methods

than other social science majors (Fair & Langston, 2002). Finally, human service majors are asked to make linkages between field-based experiences with academic content due to other service-learning courses. However, some students find the application of research to service difficult as they fail to see the relevance of research methods to the field of human services. Indeed, Schaffer and Peterson (1998) note that students in service-oriented majors may not view conducting research as part of their professional identity.

Project Selection

The project chosen for the research methods class developed after local school administrators asked me to develop a survey designed to assess perceptions of diversity. The mission of the kindergarten through eighth grade school includes a commitment to diversity and the administration was interested in whether that mission was embraced by different school stakeholders.

Fortunately, the project related to the research methods course goals and provided an essential service to the community. Both criteria are necessary for the accomplishment of a community-based research project (Mettetal & Bryant, 1996). It is also important for the chosen agency to be well organized and willing to provide students with the support required to complete research tasks (Chapdelaine, & Chapman, 1999). A critical component of project success is the agency's willingness to respect timelines imposed by semester long courses. Communication between instructor and agency personnel must occur long before the course starts. Indeed, I began discussions with school administrators during the late summer and the research methods course was not taught until the following spring.

The specific community-based research project described in this paper developed because a human service major had just completed her internship at the school, opening the door for further communication. Identifying potential research projects could stem from conversations during site visits thereby placing departments which use internships in a unique position of easily integrating community-based research into research methods classes. Additionally, many colleges and universities have offices designated to coordinate student volunteer or service-learning experiences (www.compact.org). Staff in such offices may have the "ear" of the community and help connect interested community agencies with research faculty.

Project Goals

The goals for this project focused on student learning and service to the community. First, I wanted to help students gain mastery over the course content. I also wanted to improve student attitudes toward research. Students in previous research classes arrived with great fear and trepidation about their ability to successfully complete a methods course. They often failed to see the relevance of research to their educational goals. My hope was that participating in a CBR project would decrease anxiety and increase their appreciation for the importance of research in the field of human services.

My second set of goals was centered on service to the community. I wanted the class to make an authentic contribution to a community agency. Primary schools, public or private, do not typically have funds or staff to conduct in depth surveys about issues such as diversity. I was impressed the community school was willing to tackle such a potentially divisive topic and I wanted the school to have a positive experience with outside collaboration. Positive community and university collaborations can lead to future projects or internship sites. For example, a local sexual assault response agency which often hosts human service, psychology, and sociology interns recently approached our institution about an assessment of adult services. A psychology major developed a research proposal and is now completing a funded CBR project.

Project Planning and Design

During the fall semester, I met frequently with school administrators to determine the kind of information desired. School personnel expressed an interest in “taking the pulse” of the school in terms of diversity. They were specifically interested in how diversity is perceived among students, staff, teachers, parents, trustees, and alumni. Several initial questions included: Do families from different ethnic, socio-economic, or religious backgrounds feel welcome on campus? How can curriculum support an appreciation of diversity? How can the middle school become more tolerant of differences? Which traditions celebrate diversity and which do not?

Initially, the research students (18 in total) viewed a video about the school and visited the school's website in order to better understand the culture of the school. The principal and director of

diversity visited the class to describe their vision and to answer questions. The entire class also visited the school which helped students realize that their research was for “real people” in the “real world.”

Instrument Development

One of the first tasks in a research project is to identify an interesting question. The general question, in essence, was handed to the students. However, the specifics of operationalizing the terms were left to the class. The next task was to develop surveys for the different audiences which included middle school students, parents, faculty/staff, student alumni, and trustees designed to assess perceptions of diversity. Students formed groups based upon their personal interests and began the process of reviewing the literature for information related to diversity assessment. They quickly found that extant literature focused on diversity in lower and middle schools is limited. Students then turned to diversity literature in higher education and the work place. These activities taught students the importance of careful literature searching skills, the challenge of easily developing a survey based upon existing information, and the need to be flexible and creative.

Students also had to apply concepts from their textbook regarding sound research methods by developing appropriate forms of survey distribution. With some outside technical assistance, students developed web-based surveys for the middle school students, faculty/staff, student alumni, and trustees. It was known that each of those groups had daily access to computers. The students surveying parents developed a paper and pencil survey since they were concerned that all parents may not have access to a computer.

Data Collection

The project was approved by our university Institutional Review Board (IRB). Parents of middle school children provided consent prior to their child’s participation in the survey. Collected data were stored in a locked cabinet and individual responses were not identifiable.

Data collection was facilitated by the community school. The school administration sent group emails to the students, alumni, faculty/staff and trustees with a web-link that contained the anonymous survey. Middle school students completed the survey during their regularly scheduled computer class. The school also mailed the parents’ survey and provided boxes at school for their return.

Despite the ease of data collection, the reality of community research was heightened since the college students were unable to control when the surveys were administered. Due to school-based activities, the surveys were administered relatively late in the spring semester, adding a real world concern over how to complete the project in a timely manner.

Data Entry and Analysis

Students applied analytical skills during data entry and analysis. Those groups with web-based surveys had data directly downloaded into a statistical computer program. These groups spent time cleaning the data and looking for miscoded variables. The parent group entered the data in pairs to assure accuracy. Each group then ran univariate and bivariate analyses. Groups also coded responses to open-ended questions applying qualitative analytical skills.

Final Reports and Presentations to Stakeholders

Each group of students wrote a final report that included a review of relevant literature, methodology, results, discussion and recommendations for school based upon the findings from their specific participants.

The final aspect of this project involved the presentation of findings to school administrators. Students prepared professional level presentations and shared their results and recommendations with the school's principal and director of diversity.

Project Evaluation and Impact

The CBR project described in this article was assessed at the college student and community level. First, seventeen out of eighteen students completed a survey designed to elicit student feedback in a quantitative and qualitative manner (one student was absent the day the survey was administered). Overall, student feedback suggested that working within a real community setting helped students better understand material from the textbook. Specifically, students rated how useful participation in the diversity project was in applying a variety of concepts from the textbook on a scale from 1 (not helpful at all) to 5 (very helpful). Ratings indicated students found the experience useful when applying the concepts of methodology (M=4.05), survey development (M= 4.3), data collection (M=4.2), and data analysis (M=4.0). All students either strongly agreed or agreed that research was more meaningful since

the class had a relationship with the school. They also unanimously agreed that future human service research methods should incorporate a community-based research project.

A comparison of grades between the non-CBR method classes taught the previous semester and the current class also lends weight to the argument that participating in a CBR helped students master the course material (see Table 1). The only statistically significant difference in scores was associated with Test 1. However, each measure indicated improvement in the class that used community-based research methods.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Class Assessments in a non-CBR and CBR Methods Class

	Without CBR n= 22		With CBR n= 18		Mean difference (CBR minus non-CBR)
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	
Test 1	64.1	15.6	73.5	10.8	9.4 **
Test 2	69.1	15.7	73.7	13.5	4.6
Presentation	81.8	22.6	89.4	5.5	7.6
Final report	76.8	21.6	84.3	6.8	7.5
Class absences	1.8	4.25	.96	2.7	-.84

**p<.01

A loose thematic content analysis of responses to open-ended questions further supported the argument that students valued their CBR experience. The most frequently noted theme among the benefits of participating in a community-based research project included the sense of “making a difference.” One student commented, “Actually visiting the school and having school staff come to class made this project more meaningful. We weren’t simply completing another assignment for the sake of fulfilling a course requirement. We were making a difference to a school that, otherwise, would not have been able to complete this project.” Another student wrote, “I felt like I was contributing to the community in some way rather than making up a project that would never have any impact.” The second most common theme revolved around the relevance of the textbook concepts. One student noted, “When we studied issues of sampling in the book it just made more sense when we applied sampling to our school project.”

Drawbacks to the project focused on the time pressures including the challenges faced when coordinating with another agency as well as the increased time to complete the actual work. The primary theme noted under drawbacks to CBR focused on the issues of time including the additional amount of

time associated with the project and the challenges of working with someone else's timeframe. One student stated, "It was a little more time consuming because we had to go to the school." Another commented, "Data collection was slowed because of bad timing between our breaks and their breaks, but it ended up working out in the end."

Students also appeared to take their work more seriously than in previous research methods courses based upon a decrease in absenteeism, improved grades, and overall quality of class discussions. The class understood that full and active participation in their group was required in order to deliver a quality product to the school. These findings support Strand's (2000) observation that students put extra care into work when they are invested in a CBR project.

The second level of project evaluation is reflected in the school's reaction to partnering with an academic institution as well as the implementation of recommendations made by the students. Parents and faculty were particularly impressed with the professional nature of the survey. One parent wrote on his survey, "I think it's great that college students have the opportunity to participate in such a real world experience. I don't remember doing anything this fun when I was in college! They've done a great job with these questions." Additionally, the community school chose to implement some of the recommendations made by students. The theme for the following academic year at the K-8 school was "Celebrating Community". The school administrators and faculty chose a common reading for middle school students and all parents focused on the trials and tribulations of a high school student who was different from others. Several opportunities were provided for parents to come together and discuss the book and concerns related to how differences in the school are addressed. Multiple events were held with the focus that "there's room for everyone at the table". In this sense, the goal of CBR as facilitator of social change was accomplished.

Limitations and Conclusions

Overall, the integration of community-based research into a research methods course for human service majors was a success. Students were better able to apply course content and were highly motivated to turn in quality work. However, there are several drawbacks to this community-based research project. First, this type of pedagogy is labor intensive for faculty. Partnering with a community agency requires far more work before the class even begins than the traditional classroom-based

research course. Communication began well in advance of the first day of class and expectations must be clarified before moving forward. Second, student projects were disrupted due to school issues and conflicts. For example, parent surveys did not get distributed until late in the spring semester. Students who developed the parent survey had less time to analyze and prepare their final reports/presentations than did other groups. The “real world” nature of community-based research can be an asset as well as a liability. The fact is that most agencies (even local schools) do not operate on an undergraduate academic calendar. Staffing concerns and client crises will take precedence over the timely implementation of a research project. Finally, the non-CBR class did not complete the same feedback survey as did the CBR class. Other indications of student learning (tests, presentations, final reports, and absences) suggest that the participation in CBR was associated with better demonstrated learning of course content. However, the survey information is not available from both classes.

Despite the challenges associated with community-based research, it is an approach to teaching research methods that fits well within the human service model of integrating practice and coursework. Human service majors are typically more interested in helping others than engaging in research (Fair, King, Vandermass-Peeler, 2004). However, human service majors are not the only group of students who prefer direct contact with others over research (Schaffer & Peterson, 1998).

Community-based research provides an opportunity for students to make real connections between the importance of research, practice, and communities. Opportunities for community-based research can emerge from faculty and student relationships with intern supervisors, and student volunteer and service-learning sites. The successes and challenges experienced by the human service majors enrolled in the CBR methods course are not unique to the discipline of human services. Faculty from any area within the academy will need to make contacts with community agencies, develop a reasonable time line for project completion, help students negotiate barriers, and communicate findings to appropriate stakeholders. CBR appears to hold particularly powerful meaning to those students focused on the professional provision of service, but all can benefit.

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