Three

Head and Hand Together

A Project-Based Research Model

Research and Action

Programs and Projects

The Project Model

Participatory Flexibility
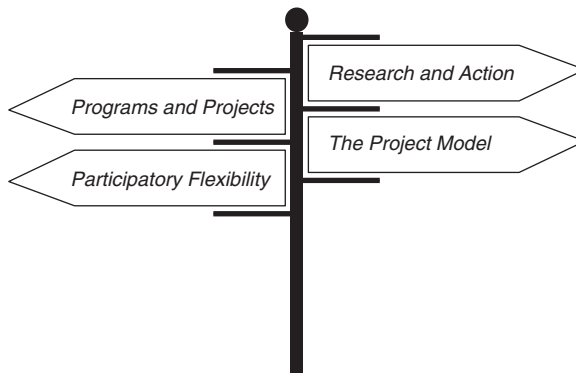
THE HEAD AND HAND SPLIT

I grew up in a working-class family, with one of those fathers who came home dirty from head to toe every evening from fixing

furnaces, repairing pipes, digging foundations, or any manner of other highly skilled but dirty, body-wearing activities. My mother, along with managing the home and at times managing a full-time clerical job, also was a skilled tailor for the family and for extra income. I was the first person in my family to go to college, and when I would come home brimming with excitement about the course I was taking in aesthetic philosophy, it was all but impossible for me to find a way to communicate all that "head work" I was doing with parents whose lives had been spent doing "hand work."

This head-hand split or, more commonly in philosophy and psychology, the "mind-body split," has been a troubling theme in Western culture for nearly as long as there has been Western culture.[1] But especially since World War II, the split has become pronounced in dividing our class system. The rise of a managerial class who does only head work, against a working class who are supposed to do only hand work, has limited us perhaps as greatly as any division in society. Those of us in higher education also experience the pressures of this split, as the emphasis on pure research often puts many roadblocks in the way of academics striving to make research useful.

There are also hopeful signs, however. The previous chapter showed new models for bringing head and hand together in the research process itself. The rise of service learning and community-based research models is transforming higher education in important ways. But we still have a ways to go. For it is not enough to change the way we do research. We also need to develop ways of linking research and practice that can directly confront the head-hand split. Doing so goes beyond fields like medicine where, even though the research is designed for application, there is still a division between medical researchers and medical practitioners, who communicate mainly through professional conferences and journals.

We can learn a lot about how to do this from all those working-class folks out there who have mastered the integration of head and hand, often without realizing it. Many of them, particularly skilled craft workers like my parents, must be able to do intellectual work in order to do their craft work. And every once in a while they become aware of just how much head work they are doing. When the Toledo Museum of Art and the University of Toledo commissioned the famous architect Frank Gehry to design a new addition to the museum that would house the university art program, he created one of his signature designs. There wasn't a right angle in the place. And he didn't provide detailed specifications on how to install all the utilities—plumbing, heating, and electric. The craft workers were nonplussed. How were they supposed to install utilities in such an oddly shaped structure? But as they worked on
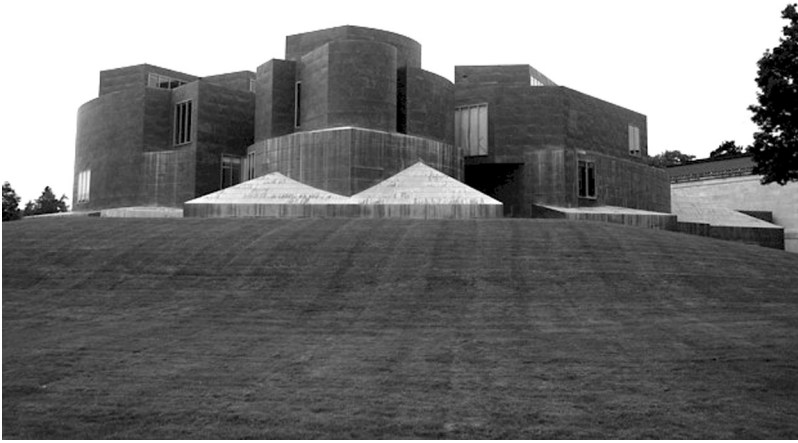
the problem and came up with the plans, they began to realize how much intellectual work they were doing, and how much they were enjoying it. Instead of engaging in cookie-cutter designs they had done dozens of times before, they were actually employing, and enjoying, their craft. They had to make their "research" process conscious—understanding the building; discovering new ways of fitting pipe, running cable, and hiding conduit; testing design options.

Except among those academics in the fields of service learning and community-based research, there is no parallel to the head and hand integration of the "hand" professions. Formal research and practice are still separate. So when those trained in academia enter fields of community and organization practice, they find themselves running programs, on the one hand, and then trying to do the research necessary for writing grant applications and conducting evaluations on those grant-funded programs, on the other.

This chapter will explore the head and hand split between research and practice, building an integrated model of how to bring the two together. Here we will explore the "project-based research model" in all its glory, looking at how project cycles work and how research may fit in at each phase of a typical project cycle.

FROM HEAD AND HAND TO RESEARCH AND ACTION

The version of the head and hand split that occurs out there in the field of community and organization change is the split between

research and action. Making change involves action, whether that is organizational restructuring, community organizing, or broad-scale social movement action. Of course, effective action depends on good information, whether for understanding the possibilities and barriers to organizational change, or the possible allies and opposition around a policy issue. But rarely are these two things brought together as fully as they could be.

Practitioners often avoid doing research because they see the world from the perspective of doing programs. You choose a need among the many available out there. You write a grant proposal. If you get the grant you try to figure out how to do the work with so little money. You accomplish what you can, and when the money runs out you stop. Research takes too long, has too many up-front costs, and provides too little payoff.

In contrast, academics are increasingly trying to do useful research but often do it wrong because they see the world from the perspective of research as an isolated and independent activity. You choose a question that interests you. You write a grant proposal. If you get the grant you try to figure out how to do the research with so little money. You hopefully get your data collected and analyzed and write an article. Application is something that comes down the road, if at all, and is almost always done by someone else, who is supposed to take your general findings and apply them to a specific situation.

One of the reasons that both practitioners and academics are reluctant to see research as helpful is because they have been trained in research as an isolated activity, disconnected from any actual application. This is a disability for many of us when we need to conduct research that is useful.

For those of you who see the world first through the eyes of a researcher, we will begin from an unexpected angle—the project. For it is important to understand that research plays only a supporting role in the project-based research model. When I do training workshops in community-based research I often discuss the difference between how academics see the relationship between action and research and how practitioners see it.

Academics first approaching project-based research tend to see the project as a research project with only a few minor implications for application or action, whereas practitioners and other community members see it as a social change project where the action is most important and research is secondary. This has some important implications. First, the research can't exist independently from the project itself. Second, and even more important, the project is not a result of the research. The research is in fact a result of the project. That does not mean the research findings are determined by the project in a

kind of "here are the conclusions, now get me some facts" way. Rather, the goals and the aims of the project, however general they may be, shape what the research question is, what kinds of methods will be used, how data will be collected, how it will be analyzed, and what will be done with it.

Furthermore, the research is but a small part of the project. There are so many other things going on. Take, for example, how the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) has been approaching the issue of predatory lending—the practice of unscrupulous lenders loaning money at inflated interest rates to people whose credit is not good enough to qualify for a conventional loan, and then repossessing the home when the loan defaults. This practice threatens central city neighborhoods with continuing instability and housing inflation. When ACORN took on this issue, one thing they did was a national study of predatory lending to identify the worst offenders. But that was just a small part of the action. The bulk of their work was with residents in at-risk communities, educating them about the risks of predatory lenders; organizing them to do actions on legitimate lenders to pressure them to do more lending in those communities; and lobbying for changes in government policy and predatory corporate practices. The research is a crucial part of the campaign, but it is also a small part, and it exists only for the purpose of furthering the goals of the campaign. There is a small research staff working on the national predatory lending study. There are thousands of people working to change government policy, increase the flow of traditional lending dollars into excluded communities, and attack predatory lenders. Of course, those separate aspects of the campaign also require research—to identify the victims of predatory lenders in a community; find out the "CRA" ratings of local banks, which tell how carefully they are following the guidelines of the federal Community Reinvestment Act; and to develop policy alternatives.

How might this program look different if it was action guided by a research project? First, the scope of the project would likely be much more limited and its trajectory much more tentative. Research, as those of us in the profession have learned, rarely offers up certain findings across wide-ranging questions. It would also likely take much longer, and action would be restricted until the findings were
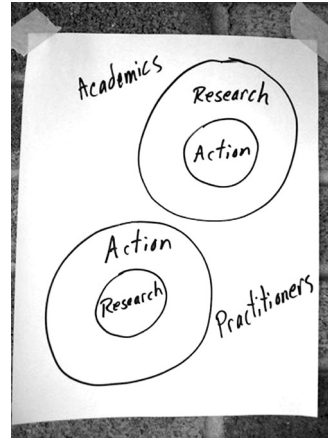
secure and strictly verified. The research would likely also be developed independently of the project goals, and could even determine the project goals.

The shorter timeline, greater flexibility, and dependent nature of project-based research doesn't mean it is sloppier or less valid than traditional research. Remember, accuracy is paramount in any kind of change effort, and especially if the change effort is likely to encounter opposition. What it does mean is that the timeline is often compressed, the research question is often limited to something that is easily countable, and the presentation of results often occurs in less formal (and less lengthy) brochure or policy brief format.

To better understand how the project guides and shapes the research, then, we need to spend some time understanding how such community and organizational change projects are developed.

OF PROGRAMS AND PROJECTS

What is the context in which project-based research operates? That depends on whom you ask. The further you get from the community, the more players you have who are invoked as "stakeholders" in any social change effort. Community members, unless they are local leaders intimately involved in the project, usually see only themselves and the ground-level workers involved with them. To the extent that they see anyone else as relevant in the context, it is often as the enemy or opposition. But move up to the level of the organization staff sponsoring an initiative, and they see an intense interconnection of agencies and organizations contributing. In the healthy communities model,[2] for example, you can find social service agencies, health clinics, hospitals, and colleges and universities. Funders may also be included among the stakeholders here, and when that happens the interlocking elites that control foundations can also be included among the players.

When we distinguish between programs and projects, we can better understand the roles of all these players in project-based research. A *program* is a more comprehensive social change initiative and often is a more abstract set of goals. A *project* is a specific implementation of one or more program goals.[3] In a comprehensive community initiative, the program attempts to simultaneously combine strategies to address social ills such as crime and unemployment with community-building activities and "bricks and mortar" community development activities.[4] Within a comprehensive community initiative program, individual projects may include general
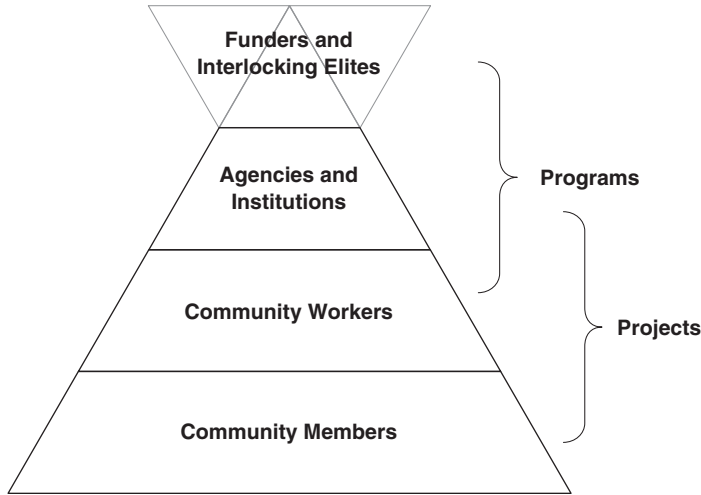
educational development (GED) classes, job training, neighborhood block watch, etc.
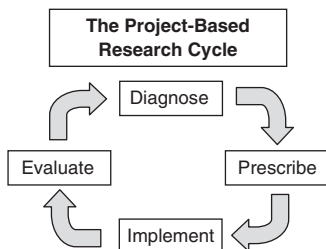
There is often a gap between the development of programs and projects that creates difficulties for both the success of the social change initiative and the conduct of any research supporting that initiative. Funders and elites, either because they sit on the boards of community organizations or because they control their purse strings, are often involved in developing or reviewing program goals. But they often know little about the specific projects implementing those program goals. Community members are much more likely to be involved in developing projects, through either direct participation or providing information to organization staff. But they typically are not involved in shaping the broader programmatic goals. Research, whether it is needs or asset assessments at the beginning of a project or evaluations at the end, is much more intimately connected to the project than to the program. This can create internal political problems if the research begins to lead individual projects in a direction different from the original program goals. This is particularly the case with funder-driven and regulation-driven programs. The main problem with such programs is that they are inadequately justified, guided, and monitored. It's not clear they fill a real need, serve an identified population, or succeed. The reason for this lack of clarity is that they were not developed, implemented, and evaluated through a careful research process with the involvement of the people they are purportedly designed to impact. One of the most interesting cases of an outsider-driven initiative that

became a community-driven initiative occurred in the Dudley Street neighborhood of Boston. The Riley Foundation, in conjunction with a consortium of social service agencies, devised a plan and created an organization to revitalize Dudley Street in 1984. But at the first community meeting where they announced their plan, they were met with a firestorm of resident protest. The good news is that the community and the consortium then worked together to create the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, becoming one of the model programs in the United States for doing projects with significant resident involvement.[5]

It is called *project-based research,* then, because it focuses on the development of concrete projects guided by people at the grassroots. Rarely in community and organization change efforts does support research study the upper levels of stakeholders except as targets of a social change effort. A main goal of project-based research is to amplify the voices and information of those who are rarely heard, so those voices and information can be used in designing specific interventions or organizational components that fit the expressed needs and desires of the constituency targeted by the program. The project comes first in such a model, and the research serves a support function, with one exception, which we will discuss in the next section.

THE PROJECT MODEL: DIAGNOSE, PRESCRIBE, IMPLEMENT, EVALUATE

Social change projects, whether they occur at the level of an organization, community, or even society, go through identifiable stages. They begin with an attempt to diagnose a condition. Based on that diagnosis, the change agents choose a treatment or prescription. The treatment is implemented, and its impact is evaluated. Depending on the impacts, a new round of diagnosis, prescription, implementation, and evaluation may be required.

The Project-Based Research Cycle

Diagnose

Evaluate

Prescribe

Implement

If we work with this medical metaphor for a moment, there are a number of different situational contexts where this model can be employed. First is the patient who displays sudden and acute symptoms and finds their way into the emergency room. The diagnosis, prescription, and implementation of treatment may need to occur quickly under such circumstances. Research support, in such

circumstances, needs to be on-call and rigorous. This is the situation community organizations find themselves in with a sudden community disaster. When disaster relief organizations such as the Red Cross or the Federal Emergency Management Agency move into a community devastated by a flood, tornado, or other disaster, they need to do more than provide relief. They also must quickly research infrastructure needs—is there safe water; how long will it take to restore electricity; how many people need shelter and how much available shelter is there; and what other kinds of aid are available? That research determines whether water is trucked in, generators are set up, temporary shelters are constructed, and other services provided.[6]

Another metaphorical scenario is the patient who comes in for their annual checkup. If it is part of a regular checkup, the physician not only provides a general exam but also may order specific tests based on the patient's history. For many community organizations, the annual strategic planning process, described in Appendix A, fits this scenario. This process is a time for the organization to review its goals for the past year, determine what was achieved and what was not, and set goals for the next year. Because these planning processes are often scheduled far in advance, there is a lot of time to research goal achievement (in an evaluation framework) and/or to research changes in the resource environment that may provide new opportunities.

The third scenario, regrettably all too common in the fields of community practice and community health, is the chronic patient requiring continuing care for specific conditions. These are conditions about which the patient can make decisions that help control the effects of the condition, but the condition itself is outside of the individual's control—diabetes, asthma, and other such conditions cannot be blamed on the individual, just as economic disinvestment and lack of educational opportunity cannot be blamed on the individual suffering community. Yet, just as the patient with diabetes can make choices about what they eat, the community can make choices about how it responds to disinvestment. Research, in such cases, can help communities learn what the best practices may be in other places; what resources are available to implement various strategies for controlling some of the effects of disinvestment; and occasionally whether it is possible to attack contributing environmental factors at city hall, the local corporate headquarters, or even the federal government.

All of these communities, however, engage projects based on the diagnose, prescribe, implement, evaluate model. It is to that model that we now turn.

1. Diagnosing

What does it mean to diagnose a condition in a community or organization? In general, diagnosis involves identifying a "change opportunity." The community or organization might express concerns about various conditions, problems, needs, or issues.[7] From that list one or more problems need to be identified[8] and developed into a problem statement.[9] As we will see in the next chapter, this can happen in various ways and depends on whether the problem is being diagnosed in a social work, public health, education, community organizing, community development, multidisciplinary, or other context. The diagnosis of the internal community or organization components involves determining who is involved in defining the problem; who must be involved in implementing any change; who may or may not benefit; who may support or oppose change; and how open the community or organization is overall to change.[10] Most important, however, the diagnosis involves more than simply understanding the organization or community internally. It also involves understanding the external context or "macro reality."[11]

It is at this stage of diagnosis where the relationship between practice and research may be reversed.[12] In cases of disorganized community settings, where there is no identifiable and broadly legitimized community leadership, the research may precede the action. This is often the case in the field of community organizing, where the organizer conducts research through a door-knocking process, learning what concerns residents have. The organizer then uses that research to find out what the most pressing issues are and recruits residents to build an organization to address those and other problems. Once the organization is built, however, the research moves to a secondary position, determined by the organization's trajectory and history.

What kinds of research are done at this stage of the project cycle? Most popular are needs assessments, where a community or organization studies its own shortcomings, service gaps, or problems. But rising in popularity is the complementary model of asset mapping, where the focus of the research is not on problems but possibilities. While these two approaches are clearly complementary, the need vs. asset approach also generates a fair amount of controversy, as we will see in the next chapter. There are also many other more specific research procedures conducted to determine or verify the extent of an already determined need, such as studying the numbers and types of offenders being released into a community to determine the scope and quantity of services that may be needed to support their

reentry. And one of the other important research processes is the "who-done-it" detective-style analysis of understanding the causal sequence of events that may have created a community cancer cluster, or caused housing abandonment, or led to skyrocketing truancy.

2. Prescribing

Once a situation has been diagnosed, it is time to begin exploring ways to impact it. This is often the most difficult part of program design and the most difficult part of the cycle to design research for. For at this stage the group managing the project is often engaging in a planning process. It may be strategic planning, where the group is charting a course for an organization. It may be program planning that involves a number of interconnected projects. It may be community land use planning limited to a specific, set land area and a limited set of development options. Or it may be limited to planning a narrowly defined project.

Another complication is that there may not have been careful research done to diagnose a problem, which is particularly the case with funder-driven projects. An organization may be implementing a program without knowing much about the need. A public health smoking-cessation program done without careful research to learn the extent of smoking, the situational factors contributing to smoking, and other details of the community where the program will be implemented will make program design all the more difficult.

There are nonetheless a number of information categories that need to be addressed at this stage of the project cycle. Most important, a group or organization may not know what project options are available to address the diagnosed problem or issue. In that case the first research project needed is a best-practices analysis. This may be as simple as a library or Web search, but it is often more complicated. As Chapter 5 will show, developing comparative research standards may be crucial to developing an effective prescription. Just as a physician will not prescribe certain antibiotics to patients with certain allergies, certain intervention projects won't work well in certain settings.

The other kind of information needed to make a prescription has to do with understanding the local resource base. One of the main tasks will be designing the details of the project, including how many personnel with what kinds of skills are needed to do the work, how long it will take, and what materials will be necessary.[13] It is helpful to know at the beginning of project planning whether the resources necessary to implement a particular prescription are available. This

analysis goes beyond just seeing whether the money is available to also looking at what barriers to implementation may exist, including political opposition or risks.[14] If the goal is to create a community policing program, but the community is highly distrustful of the police, then that issue may need addressing before implementing any new program.

At this stage of the project cycle, then, a group or organization may be using a wide variety of research practices. They may do comparative research to judge the fit of different interventions from other places. They may conduct a community power study to judge local support for a particular intervention. They may use various forms of brainstorming or visioning processes to find out what solutions community members can come up with. They may also do policy research, particularly if the goal is to change a government or corporate policy. And in contrast to the diagnosis stage, where the research may occur somewhat independently from other organizational processes, at the prescription stage the research is carefully integrated with a planning process, with information gained from the research informing the planning process along the way, and the planning process informing what research is needed.

3. Implementing

We often think about the implementation stage as that part of the project cycle beyond research—after all, implementation is the *hand* part of the project cycle. But that is actually not the case at all. Especially if you are following a participatory research model, research may in fact *be* the project.

There are a number of cases where research is the project. Community theater and art projects provide the best examples of research as the project. Community theater, as a practice used to interpret community conditions, celebrate community characteristics, or present community problems, is integrally based on research into those conditions, characteristics, or problems. In some cases the art may be the result of diagnostic research, but often a group or organization chooses performance, visual, or other art as a medium and then conducts research to supports its development. A number of communities, as we will see in Chapter 6, have also developed community Web sites involving intensive community research.

What types of research are typically conducted to support community art/performance projects? The possibilities are innumerable, ranging from analyzing census statistics, or using Geographic Information Systems software, to digging through old historical records

and conducting oral history interviews, to photography and other alternative data collection procedures. But there are a couple of research methods that show up regularly in community art and performance projects. One of those is oral histories, which are especially popular in cross-generational community art projects. Such projects typically involve youth interviewing community elders as part of a community history recovery project, or members of indigenous communities interviewing speakers of the indigenous language to preserve it. The other is case study analysis, where a group charts the causal sequence of a community issue or problem, using the data to present the information in artistic form.

Another set of examples where research becomes part of the project itself is in advocacy campaigns. A group that may have diagnosed a problem, and traced the cause to a government policy or a corporate practice, then engages in an advocacy campaign to change that policy or practice. In such situations the group needs more than good data about the problem. They also need data about the target of the change. In the case of a corporate target, that may involve who the major investors are, what the economic health of the corporation is, and what competitors there are. In the case of a government target, the research focuses on what the bureaucratic regulations and processes are for a policy change, as well as what the political vulnerabilities of public officials may be.

This form of research, often called *target research,* is also multi-methodological. It is the most challenging ethically because it sometimes involves clandestine research done undercover or through informants and closeted whistleblowers. It can also use a number of publicly available records, such as annual reports and tax records in the case of corporate targets and, in the case of government targets, employ the Freedom of Information Act.

4. Evaluating

Perhaps the most misunderstood part of the project cycle is the evaluation phase. Too often the evaluation phase is something required but not supported by funders, and the results are too often used to determine whether the project gets continued or renewed funding, rather than to actually improve the project design and implementation. In addition, evaluation is often conducted by outside researchers who may be only marginally familiar with the organization and/or the community and do their research only at the end of the project. And, finally, the preferred evaluation model is one that concentrates on *outcomes.* Measuring outcomes, such as changes in teen

alcohol abuse, is challenging enough. Then attempting to determine whether the teen alcohol reduction project had any impact on those measured changes is even more difficult.

Consequently, those doing the hand work of project implementation often resent funders imposing evaluation requirements and outside researchers conducting those evaluations. Under such circumstances, especially when funding is on the line, getting good information can become a cat-and-mouse game. Organization staff try to "spin" the data they present to put on their best face, and may even withhold some information because they distrust the outside evaluator. This serves no one's purposes. Funders don't get good information on which to base funding decisions. Project managers don't get good information for planning successful implementations. And researchers lose credibility with both parties.

There are other evaluation models, however, that contrast with traditional evaluation in a number of important ways. First, they are designed to be used by those managing the project rather than by funders. In such *utilization-focused* evaluation[15] the goal is to provide information to those doing the project hand work so that they can make corrections along the way rather than only learn what worked and didn't work at the end of the project. Second, such evaluations are increasingly guided by those doing the project work rather than being designed by disconnected outside researchers. Such *empowerment* or *participatory evaluation*[16] models assure that the information collected will be directly useful to the people actually doing the work. Third, in these new evaluation models, the research starts when the project starts rather than being tacked on at the end. Chapter 7 will explore how the evaluation becomes part of even the diagnosis, prescription, and implementation stages of the project cycle. The more quickly the data is collected, analyzed, and reported, the more quickly the project managers can identify potential problems and unexpected successes and make any needed midcourse corrections.

As we will see, employing a utilization-focused, participatory evaluation method does not mean eschewing any concern about outcomes. Indeed, it is impossible to determine whether to make midcourse corrections without having good outcome measurement. What is different from traditional outcome evaluation, however, is that the project process is studied as rigorously as the project outcomes, focusing on understanding the causal path from the intervention to the outcome. And the measures are determined in close consultation with the people doing the project work, bringing hand and head together.

THE PROJECT MODEL AND PARTICIPATORY FLEXIBILITY

Most of my focus so far has been on projects that occur at the local level. And indeed, that is where most project-level work occurs. But there are also many projects that occur on a much larger scale. Take the Kyoto Protocol on global warming, for example.[17] This is a global-level project attempting to reduce greenhouse emissions blamed by many for increasing global average temperatures and creating increasingly volatile climate changes. The research attempting to diagnose the extent of the problem and the validity of the theorized connection between global temperature rise and greenhouse gases is terribly complex. Then imagine attempting to evaluate the relationship between strategies and outcomes. There is not just a single project occurring at the level of the nation or world. Instead, there is a collection of separate projects occurring in many different locales. They may even have different goals. In Brazil, the global warming problem is more about the destruction of the Amazon rain forest. In the United States, the problem is much more about automobile emissions. But even in the U.S., there are places where the problem is much more about coal-fired power plants than about cars. Ultimately, then, the unit of analysis is often at least partly local. It may mean studying the emissions of a single coal-fired power plant and attempting to separate that plant's emissions from emissions drifting over hundreds of miles from other sources.

The need to both understand and separate the global and the local struck the public health field in the spring of 2003 with the discovery of Sudden Acute Respiratory Syndrome, or SARS. It was certainly not the first time that global and local had come together in a public health crisis, as acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) had already created a model for studying the global transmission of disease. But SARS struck at a time of mass movement of people across the globe through airplanes. Interestingly, however, the main source of transmission did not seem to be airplanes. In fact, those most at risk of contracting the disease were medical staff, and it took some time for public health researchers to understand hospitals as a primary source of transmission. Once they did, new protocols for isolating patients, and standards for infection control, dramatically changed the way many hospitals approached a patient with a cough and fever.

The important point of this discussion is the need for flexibility. This book will present many cookie-cutter approaches to research at

each phase of a social change project. But those cookie-cutter approaches will work only as well as the process that designs the research. Research fads put the research before the project. Take, for example, the explosion of interest in "social capital" in the 1990s. Made most famous by Robert Putnam's "bowling alone" thesis[18] that argued people were no longer engaged in collective community activities, therefore depriving the community of "social capital," projects sprang up to build social capital. But too few of those projects did adequate diagnostic research to understand the relationship between social capital and real capital—the lack of good jobs, fair mortgage rates, and locally owned commercial activity. In many poor communities, a lack of social networks was a consequence, not a cause, so interventions designed to build social capital started at the wrong end of the problem.

Another fad that puts method before process is the "logic model" framework being promoted by numerous foundations, including the United Way.[19] This model is propelled by the right motivation—to get community groups to think systematically about the relationship between goals, strategy, and the information needed to determine goal achievement. But from there, too many of the efforts degenerate into telling groups what their goals should be, what strategies they should use, and what measures are acceptable. Consequently, the logic models become fill-in-the-blank templates that restrict groups from custom-designing intervention processes and experimenting with new possibilities. And to the extent that groups are given less and less flexibility in determining their own goals, strategies, and measures, the logic model actually diminishes the role of research in determining what is best for a particular group facing a particular situation.

Project-based research requires a more flexible research process, less dictated by fads and more guided by community members. It uses the participatory research process outlined in Chapter 2 that involves community members at every stage of the research—from choosing the research question through reporting the results—to create projects that more accurately identify and target causes as well as consequences.

At each project phase, then, any research supporting it needs to go through the steps of choosing the question, designing the methods, collecting the data, analyzing the data, and reporting the results as collaborative activities. The more collective and participatory the process at each step, the more likely the research will take into account the uniqueness of the setting in which the project occurs and the context surrounding it.

WHERE ARE YOU IN THE PROJECT CYCLE?

While the project cycle outline seems straightforward, determining where a group or organization is in that cycle can be more difficult than it may first appear. And, consequently, determining what research may be useful to a project can also be difficult. One of the things I do when I am working with a group is to ask them what activities they are engaged in and what kinds of information they need in doing those activities. We can often generate a very long list that would easily budget out to a six-figure grant application. Filling all of those information needs all at once is unrealistic, of course, so we then prioritize those needs by a series of questions:

1. What kinds of information are easiest (in terms of time, skill, and money) to get?
2. What kinds of information will provide the greatest immediate benefit to the project?
3. What kinds of information is the group or organization in the best position to use?

The answers to these questions can vary tremendously depending on where a group or organization is in the project cycle. A project designed to reduce teen alcohol and drug use would benefit tremendously from solid baseline research on the extent of alcohol and drug use among a specified teen population. But such information is extremely difficult to get. Imagine how long it would take to identify and develop trusting relationships with every teenager in a community to get reliable data on their alcohol and drug use to establish a baseline, and then do a follow-up after the program is finished. Instead, the need to finish the project on a certain schedule may only make it possible to do research with the teens in the project. A group that has already begun a breast cancer screening program is not in a position to second-guess whether the program is actually needed or appropriate. It may be in a position, however, to do an evaluation that can backtrack and compare project activities to a needs analysis of the target population.

Organizations involved in ongoing service activities will find it most difficult to decide where they are in the project cycle. Often, such organizations seem to be in a perpetual implementation phase, adapting to changes in laws and base budgets but otherwise providing a steady state of services. These are the organizations discussed in Chapter 1, who are so busy just providing services that they cannot imagine doing research to change or expand their

activities. But those organizations often also go through regular internal reviews, or prepare annual reports, that require reflecting on their activities. Those providing direct services may also find new situations walking through the door on a regular basis but will only know that if they have a tracking system in place to help them identify new common issues arising in their constituency.

For those organizations not certain where they are in the project cycle, or what research may be most beneficial, the boxed list below may be of some value.

Where Are You In the Project Cycle?

1. Diagnosis

- We are noticing our clientele seeking different services than they used to.
- We know that X is a problem but are not sure why.
- We want to know what is going on in our community.
- We are redoing our strategic plan.

2. Prescription

- We want to know the best practices for dealing with situation X.
- We can get funding to do program X but don't know if it will work in our community.
- We need to know whether there is anything we can do about situation X with our resources.

3. Implementation

- We want to restore, preserve, or celebrate some aspect of our community/group.
- We need to find where the political opportunities are in our city government to win a policy issue.
- We need to find the leverage points to get a corporation to change its practices.

4. Evaluation

- We need to know if we are having any impact.
- We are trying to decide if we should change our mission or strategies.

This collection of statements is neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. It is possible, for example, that an organization revising its strategic plan—the document that sets the organization's goals and strategies—may wish to start with an evaluation of the success of its current strategic plan. But it may also be that the organization has accomplished the goals in its strategic plan and is trying to decide what to do next. That is the case with a number of community development corporations who have found themselves in the problematic position of having achieved their housing production goals. Now that they have no more vacant neighborhood land, and no more units to restore, they must find new needs to keep the organization going. Similarly, at the prescription phase, determining whether an intervention will work depends on an accurate diagnosis.

LOOSE GRAVEL

Understanding the project cycle and where you are in it is not just important to deciding what to research. It is also important to deciding, literally, what to do. Knowing whether you have done an adequate diagnosis before beginning a program; have carefully studied all the options before making a final prescription; are following through on what you said you were going to do in the implementation; and are paying careful attention to evaluating your progress is crucial to project success. Research, remember, is but a single component of a much larger and more complex process, and it exists only as support for the project itself. That complexity becomes enmeshed in the relationship between the research and the project itself, leading to two types of loose gravel along the way. One is about time and the other is about politics.

Of Timelines and Deadlines

A few years ago a couple of my graduate students worked with one of the local community organizations here collecting data to support a $50,000 grant proposal to build a community policing program. Their job was to go through pages and pages of crime reports and victim evaluations from the neighborhood, determining the frequency of various types of crimes and average scores for police response. The information had to be available, on a strict deadline, so the organization could submit their grant proposal. It was, and the organization got their grant. It was a proud moment for me as a professor because the students had committed themselves to the

project's timeline rather than to the semester timeline (which didn't fit the project at all).

As we saw in the previous chapter, deadlines in community work are often much more strict than they are in academic work. But the conditions under which community organizations work are often also much less stable. The loose gravel here is how to determine and meet strict deadlines at the same time that the project timeline is shifting like sand blowing in the desert. I recently did research with the West Bank Community Development Corporation in Minneapolis's Cedar-Riverside neighborhood, introduced in the previous chapter, to support their strategic planning process. Strategic planning processes normally take a few months. But in this case, a rapidly deteriorating economy and local political conflicts disrupted the CDC's housing development timeline, delaying the sale of CDC-owned houses in the neighborhood and disrupting its cash flow. In addition, a lawsuit between the CDC and a group of residents stalled the planning process and detoured other CDC funds to lawyers. In the midst of this, quite understandably, the CDC director suffered a heart attack. Only now, two years later as I wrote the first draft of this chapter, did we return to the strategic planning process that the original research process was to support. A lot has happened since the summer of 2001, far beyond terrorist attacks and wars.

Had we been able to foresee all that would happen, we would have delayed the research. Some of the original research, documenting which other organizations operate in the community that the CDC can partner with, needs to be updated. But the need to get the strategic plan in place quickly, once houses were being sold and the cash flow improved, made that impractical.

This is not an unusual circumstance. Matching the flow of the research to the flow of the project cycle is tricky, and a bad match can be costly. If the research gets too far ahead of the project cycle it can become out of date by the time it is used. If the research gets too far behind, the project may have to move ahead without it. This is where the need to combine research expertise with project expertise becomes crucial. To the extent that no one in the project can predict either how long the research will take or how long the project will take, one of the first research activities involves determining the time and money resources needed for certain kinds of projects and certain kinds of research.

What I often do to organize support research for a community change project, which will be outlined more in the coming chapters, is a "backward" planning process. I work most often with neighborhood organizations, and we often start by bringing together

Planning Research Backward

1. What are the goals and desired outcomes of the project?

2. What are the activities needed to achieve those goals and outcomes?

3. What information is needed along the way, at various points in the project cycle, to support those activities?

4. How can that information best be obtained?

neighborhood residents with organization staff for a planning process. We look at where in the project cycle the group or organization is to see what kinds of research are most beneficial. We then discuss what the goals of the project are (or should be if they are not yet determined)—essentially looking a year or more down the road. Starting from that future, we move back in time to discuss the steps needed to reach those goals and what is involved in achieving each step. We then focus on outlining what the research will involve, based on where in the project cycle the group or organization needs the research. I can bring some experience on how much time different kinds of research require (though I am still surprised sometimes when we actually do the research). By the time we are done, after a couple of hours, we have a pretty good idea of what is needed to do the research and the project.

This "backward" planning process is common in the strategic planning field.[20] What is not common, however, is the integration of research with the strategic planning process. It is, in fact, possible for highly resourced projects to integrally plan the project and its needed support research at each step of the project cycle.

The Politicized Research Process

Community change projects, even those being done as social service, are often political. Making social change means disrupting stable patterns of power and interaction. And those patterns, however unhealthy they may be, often also feel comfortable even to those suffering.

What are some of the sources of research politicization? Well, they come primarily from the politicization of the project. The organization doing the project may be politicized as a competitor in

a multi-organizational field or a politically factionalized community. Those doing the project may be politicized as "outsiders" by community members. A social change effort may be politicized by threatened elites or public officials. And an organization may be politicized internally by research that may expose organizational weaknesses or other problems.

One of the most interesting examples comes from El Paso, where a group of high school students, in partnership with a community organization, researched the lending practices of area banks. The research generated intense publicity even before it was finished. As the publicity increased, banks' willingness to participate in the research decreased. This was a political minefield for the local university, even though it was only indirectly connected to the research at the time. But careful negotiations between university representatives, bankers, and local businesses actually produced funding for a university-led study seen as having less bias but still involving the students.[21]

This form of target research often produces the most dangerous political situations and is one of the most important examples of why the project needs to take priority over the research. Without an already organized group building political power to take on powerful institutions like banks, an individual piece of research, and particularly an individual researcher, can be extremely vulnerable. But organized groups can counter the power of money with the power of people, preserving the integrity of research and allowing it to support the power-building process.

While the politicization of target research can make life difficult for community change efforts, in some ways an even riskier form of research focuses internally on a community or organization. The issues involved in doing community history recovery or internal project evaluations will be treated in depth in the chapter on implementation and the appendix on ethics. For our immediate purposes, it is important to understand what the general risks are. Any research that focuses inwardly, using a participatory approach, on the history and culture of a community carries with it the risk of letting skeletons out of the closet and cats out of the bag, consequently rekindling old feuds and resentments. More than that, it carries the additional risk of creating new feuds and resentments. What happens when the research documents the failure of a past community project and names names in assigning cause to the failure? What happens when the research documents differences in power and prestige, however minute, between community members?

There are those in community settings who will commission the research for their own ends and purposes rather than for community

ends and purposes, and who want to control the flow of information. Thankfully, these individuals are relatively easy to identify. They are the ones who do not want to share information within the organization or among their constituency. And this is one of the challenges of "working from the middle," discussed in the previous chapter, where the organization is not connected to its constituency in any substantial way. Some service organizations want to be more connected to their communities and welcome the opportunity to employ research as a way to develop that connection. Others have more of a social control orientation and refuse to share information with their constituency, or argue that "they" wouldn't be able to understand it or wouldn't be interested in it.

For those of us who do project-based research—either from the inside as organization members or from the outside as researchers for hire—the politics of community change requires that we often add a step to the research process. Before we engage in community-based research processes, we need to do adequate "pre-research." The pre-research process involves studying the community itself to understand its leadership structure, resource distribution, organizational infrastructure, and culture. By doing so, you can identify factions, uncover actual or potential resentments, and begin to get hints of what closeted skeletons and bagged cats may be lurking in the corners of the community.

In addition, the pre-research process also begins to build relationships in the community. Indeed, learning who will and will not talk to you as the researcher is one way to quickly begin to understand where the trust lines are drawn. In a recent research project I engaged in, involving door-to-door interviews as part of a project evaluation, one of the things we began to learn about was a neighborhood faction angry at a prominent community organization. Some community members, in hearing this organization was one of the research sponsors, even refused to talk to me. Others gave me an earful about how they believed the organization had bypassed them for benefits or shortchanged them in favor of another perceived community faction. At this point our research project became a pre-research project, helping us reconsider how to get accurate information. Thankfully, because the research was being sponsored by a number of community organizations in coalition, we could emphasize the research as serving the coalition, which was less well known in the community but also not politicized.

Pre-research does not have to be a highly sophisticated process, but there are a set of questions that can guide the researcher's information-gathering:

1. How is formal power distributed in the community or organization? Who is most influential in determining who gets and who doesn't get? Who is connected to power holders outside of the community or organization, impacting how resources flow across those boundaries?

2. How is informal power distributed in the community or organization? Who is seen as a strong role model or source of advice, regardless of whether they occupy any formal leadership position?

3. If formal leaders and informal leaders are different people, what is the relationship between them? What is the history of their relationships? Are there long-standing resentments or unfriendly competitions?

4. What are the controversial issues in the community or organization and how do people line up on those issues? Are people deeply polarized on any issues? Are formal and/or informal leaders deeply polarized?

5. Where does the proposed research project fall in this web of power and relationships? In what ways could it contribute to increased polarization or conflict between community or organization leaders and members?

Often the most convenient place to start addressing these pre-research questions is within the group or organization sponsoring the research, asking for a sense of the community. They will typically identify other individuals to speak with. When the research will focus on a community, asking about what service organizations, churches, and businesses are important in the community will provide a lot of information. In an organization setting, asking about how the organization was founded and how it has changed will provide information on its stability and potential points of internal conflict. Old newsletters or newspapers, especially at the micro- community setting, often identify influential individuals and organizations. None of this needs to be done clandestinely. In fact, I find that I develop the most trust when I am the most honest, explaining how the research, and the project it is supporting, can go awry if all parties concerned don't have a shared understanding of the political fault lines in the community or organization and how those may impact the research process. Of course, if you are an outside researcher, you don't just blurt out that you need to know what the factions are at the first research planning meeting. Trust and relationships are as crucial at the pre-research stage as they are at all stages of the project-based research process itself.

Head and Hand . . . and Heart?

It is true that being able to reflect on the work of community change—bringing head and hand together—is a luxury. Funders will still not often pay for the information-gathering activities necessary to make the most of community change projects. Community groups and organizations still lack the capacity to take on such support research themselves. But we will see that there are numerous examples of groups and organizations employing community-based research, often with the aid of pro-bono researchers from colleges and universities.

While skepticism remains that research can support social change, there is also significant hope that it can. Community change is about more than just integrating hand work and head work. It is also, fundamentally, about heart work. The hours are too long, the pay too low, the risks too high, and the sacrifices too great to do community work for solely practical or intellectual reasons. In the many project-based research activities with which I have been involved, I have sat around the table with mothers who have lost their teenagers to gunfire, coal miners who have lost their health to coal dust, parents who have lost their homes to corporate disinvestment, residents who have lost their neighbors to carcinogens in their water, and many other people suffering many other losses and indignities. Their commitment to doing everything possible to create a better future for themselves, their neighbors, and their children starts in the heart. And it is their heart that requires us to find ways to make sure their efforts succeed. They have the heart and they are doing the hand work. What they often need is support for the head work. Sometimes that simply means having extra hands to collect information. Other times it means having expertise to gather accurate information. But when brought together, the heart-hand-head combination does more than support community change. It also helps make all of us more whole.

CONCLUSION

These past three chapters have focused on the foundation of project-based research. Chapter 1 looked at the general underpinnings of applied research. Chapter 2 looked at the processes of participatory research. This chapter has tried to bring those principles together in outlining the model of project-based research, which included:

- Reconnecting head and hand, or in this case research and action
- Distinguishing programs and projects, and focusing project-based research at the project level

- Specifying what happens at each of the stages of project-based research: diagnosis, prescription, implementation, and evaluation
- Practicing participatory flexibility
- Judging where you are in the project cycle

We also looked at some of the difficulties involved in project-based research, including:

- Managing timelines and deadlines
- Doing research in politicized contexts

These first three chapters have been the building blocks, the foundation, for what is to come. Next we will move into the details of each step of the project-based research cycle, beginning in Chapter 4 with diagnosing.

RESOURCES

Developing and Designing Programs and Projects in a Community Setting

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