

June, 2006 – Dr. Alex Trillo, Sociology and Urban Studies

Research Tip

Ideas for Connection

Out of the Classroom and Into the Community: Teaching and Learning through Community Based Research Projects

During the 2005-2006 academic year I was fortunate enough to work with colleagues designing and implementing undergraduate courses that engaged students in community based research (CBR) projects. Funded by the Simon Foundation, our activities were part of an effort to engage students in the virtues of CBR and to do so in an alternative learning environment. Our courses had students and faculty providing research skills (and people-power) to help organizations learn more about their communities and to become more proficient in the area of self assessment. The year ended with a day-long conference in which students presented their research findings.

This research tip outlines some insights from this year's projects with a focus on putting CBR courses in the mix of opportunities for more Saint Peter's faculty and students. Though our projects were designed as a means for teaching, I believe the ideas presented here have merit for researchers because our method is grounded in faculty and students *doing* research. Such faculty-student collaborations, when done appropriately, create benefits for everyone. Students learn, first hand about the research process and how to use their research skills. For faculty, CBR courses create research opportunities and a chance to socialize our students into a more nuanced aspect of a discipline.

Of course, it would be impossible for me to claim total ownership of these ideas. The Simon work was a group effort and included a range of experienced faculty including Jennifer Ayala, Joyce Henson, Donal Malone, Dolores Perry, Robert Perry and David Surrey. Each made a variety of contributions to the project. I have also been lucky enough to engage with earlier projects at the Field Museum of Chicago's CCUC. Nonetheless, the text here is my own and so I do not claim to convey everyone's point of view, nor do I expect them to take credit for my mistakes.

My suggestions can be summed up as follows: 1) Make time for building and maintaining relationships with community based agencies; 2) Find a balance between classroom learning and CBR activities that is appropriate for your class; 3) Take advantage of uncertainty and serendipitous learning; 4) Be reflexive and create mechanisms to remind students what they have learned; 5) Create research-related opportunities beyond the immediate experience to round out the experience; and 6) Think about and communicate ways to adjust the institutional infrastructure to allow for optimal delivery of CBR and other alternative course formats. Each is explained below.

Make Time for Building and Maintaining Community Relations

Like most relationships, building partnerships with CBOs takes a bit of time and effort. In our case, Perry and Surrey had longstanding relationships to many Jersey City CBOs, including those preferred by the Simon Foundation. By the time I arrived on campus in August 2005, the list of organizations was already in place, contacts had been made and, in some cases, initial project meetings were already scheduled. Perry and Surrey had spent a good part of summer coordinating these events.

There were other matters to consider when working with CBOs. For example, CBO representatives tend to be busy. CBOs are usually small organizations with small budgets trying to take on big problems like poverty, homelessness and education.

CBOs also tend to work in the context of an ever-changing environment. On one occasion, a handful of my students visited a meeting of homeless service providers trying to decipher new federal guidelines on counting and funding homeless shelters. What they observed was that the representatives spent a lot of time trying to understand and react to ongoing changes in laws and policy at the federal, state and local levels. And, in a democracy, these changes happen all the time.

Yet another factor to consider is the historical context in which community research is conducted. CBOs have long endured the researchers who proclaim to want to help the organization only to have the researcher pursue her/his own personal agenda, subvert the interests of the CBO, then disappear. In that sense, agencies understandably want to be assured that they are spending their time wisely by working with us. They probably need to know that our interests are genuine, that we will work with them over the long haul and not take off at the end of the semester.

Finally, like all research projects, there tend to be glitches. Sometimes the desired data is not readily available or personnel delays set things behind schedule. These kinds of situations require an ongoing communication with the organization.

In sum, faculty and students who thus reach out to CBOs should note that it will probably take more than an email or one phone call to make contact with representatives and even more to build and maintain a working relationship.

Strike a Balance between Classroom Learning and CBR Activities

CBR courses can range from the purely activity-based to a more traditional model with one or a few mini activities varying in depth and time commitment. Many fall somewhere in between. The challenge, of course is deciding how much of each is necessary for your particular course.

In the fall of 2005 I started Simon activities with So. 151: Social Problems. The course substantively focused on homelessness for ten weeks with readings, lecture and discussion followed by midterm-essays. The EL component was incorporated into the last four to five weeks of the semester. During the final weeks, readings and lectures were scaled back to a minimum. But even then it became obvious that just a few readings might compromise the time students had to dedicate to the research activities. My response on this occasion was to make sure students had adequate time to be in the field. Some of the material was simply omitted from the class, while the more pertinent information was conveyed by me in the form of brief lectures. In this case, the tradeoff was a worthwhile one.

My spring 2006 EL courses were grounded in So 448: Statistics for the Social Sciences and So. 450 Research Techniques for the Social Sciences. This was both good and bad. On the one hand, it assured that students would have some familiarity with statistics and research methods, without which the students are generally less prepared for in-depth research activities. But these courses are both more rigorous and critical to the major and therefore less conducive to adjustments that forego material. This meant that the course would require students to digest a lot of substantive class material, and do a lot outside the class in the form of project activities.

For these two courses, most of the classroom learning and activities happened simultaneously. After a few weeks of introductory material, part of the week would be spent on lecture and class discussion and the other part on applying these lessons to the development and execution of our projects. In the end there was a small degree of sacrifice on both ends, though not as much material was omitted as was the case with the Social Problems course from fall 2005.

Take Advantage of Uncertainty and Serendipitous Learning

As teachers we like to plan, and CBR courses arguably require more planning than usual. We have to make sure that students are prepared for CBR activities and that the activities can and will be executed in the most constructive manner possible. Yet, part of the value of CBR and other EL courses is the real-world experience of engaging with uncertainties and the learning that happens when students work through them. For these reasons, I like to take advantage of these conditions and, in some cases, try to provoke them with tasks that will likely have students confront the unexpected.

For example, in one project students produced a survey instrument for interviews. After a few interviews, the students realized that they needed to make some modifications to the interview to include questions on a topic that previously had not seemed relevant. But as one student pointed out, the risk was that we might alter the remaining interview responses by introducing a changed interview. In the end, the students felt it was necessary to modify the questions to address the new topic. They also decided that to account for such a change, they

would compare and contrast any differences in responses between the initial interviews and the modified ones. In sum, the students responded to an unforeseen situation with a rather creative and responsible plan that was not unlike many scientific investigations.

Of course, it is important to let students know in advance—and remind them several hundred times—that part of the experience will include making adjustments. As much as some students appreciate a consistent schedule, the realities of getting a real-life research experience would be compromised by assuming that everything will work out as planned. This is especially true in CBR where the organization's interests are privileged and where representatives might add or subtract from their needs as they move forth and learn from our research.

Remind Students What They Have Learned

In the traditional classroom we have direct measures of performance that allow students to assess where they stand and what they have learned. But in activity based courses what students learn can be far more abstract. For example, while learning to input and analyze data in SPSS, my students learned a range of skills that are valuable to the research process. Yet, without reminders or a context for the significance of these skills, recoding variables or generating elementary statistics to check their work might have seemed like meaningless busy-work to them.

I used class discussions, memos and progress reports to let students know what they have learned and to provide a context for why it matters. The progress reports were particularly useful. Here I would outline a set of learning objectives, the specific tasks they were related to and short explanation on significance. The reports also reminded students which tasks and objectives they had accomplished and what others remained. This provided a sense of accomplishment and organization to their activities.

Create Opportunities for Student Benefit beyond Immediate Learning

CBR courses open the possibility for added benefits that can be built into the experience. In our case, all students had the opportunity to present their work at the Simon/Sociology Department Conference. This meant that students would gain valuable skills in the preparation and delivery of a conference paper as well as a meaningful addition to their resumes.

Other options that we are developing at this time include authorship/co-authorship on future conference papers, journal articles and final reports that we are currently preparing for the CBOs. In fact, many of these reports will be posted on the sociology department website, which is one means for publication of the student's accomplishments. All of these will contribute a greater sense of the field of research while, again, providing concrete items for students to reference on resumes and graduate school applications.

Consider Institutional Infrastructure for CBR and other Activities Based Courses

A change in the way we teach courses might mean that we have to consider other institutional arrangements such as the kind of support that is available with the logistics of CBR activities and the way in which course patterns are structured. In our case, part of the time necessary to build and maintain relations with our funding organization was well-served by Leah Leto, the SPC Director for Corporate, Foundation and Major Gifts. Leah worked closely with Malone and Surrey in keeping in step with Simon's award requirements and any necessary modifications to the research process.

In the more day-to-day activities there were challenges to consider. For example, working within the confines of a M-W-Th 50 minute class schedule proved difficult. Project activities often require reflective discussions and logistical modifications. And many CBR courses, mine included, offer students class time to carry out project requirements. For these kinds of situations, the 50 minute time slot was a constraint that often limited what we could accomplish. On our part, the sociology department has begun experimenting with more once-a-week, three-hour courses that allow time for extended discussions, logistical adjustments, and, when necessary, time for students to get out into the field.

Other challenges included managing transportation to research sites and making sure students were well-prepared to represent the College off-site. These and similar issues suggest that an administrative position that coordinates with CBR courses might be useful. Such a position might also assist in finding commonalities among faculty developing these kinds of courses, sharing information and facilitating collaborative efforts.