

FAA 391, Spring 2008
Action Research Seminar

Instructors:

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Meeting time: Tuesday and Thursday 12-1:15PM. Trips to East St. Louis as needed (App. 3 times).

Meeting Place: 322 Noble Hall

Course gives Honors credits for James Scholars.

Course Description:

This course is designed to offer undergraduate students the opportunity to develop research skills and an appreciation for research activities as applied to real life needs in distressed urban communities. Unlike a traditional methods class, this course requires students to fully engage in the entire research process. Students are expected to collectively establish a research question, conduct fieldwork using qualitative and/or quantitative methods, and as a group complete a project of sufficient quality that it will be submitted for publication or presentation. Students in FAA 391 will conduct applied research within the social sciences and humanities with the subject of research being identified amongst partner organizations in the research setting of East St. Louis, Illinois.

The course is an interdisciplinary opportunity afforded by the existing structure of the East St Louis Action Research Project (ESLARP), offering a network of faculty in various disciplines with strong relationships to community based organizations in East St. Louis. In addition to faculty and staff, ESLARP employs 12 graduate assistants each year from various disciplines. This group of graduate students will serve as mentors and advisors for students in FAA 391.

The class has a unique structure that combines the benefits of lecture/discussion style class work that is interdisciplinary in its delivery, with applied and discipline specific research projects (including service learning) facilitated by faculty and with required final products (papers and presentations).

Course Research approach:

The research approach applied in this course is known as Action Research (AR). Action Research seeks to be a transformative activity to confront societal injustice, and recognizes power relations as a defining basis of society. It is therefore a particularly useful paradigm when working in the research setting of an oppressed community. This is also a good approach when the goal is to convey a broad range of research methods to a diverse group of students (as in this interdisciplinary class) because it can encompass a wide range of methods, qualitative as well as quantitative. Action Researchers accept statistical analysis, surveys, interviews, focus groups, and participant observation methods etc. as equally valid methods. According to this tradition, research, in the positivist tradition, suffers from the assumption that “expert

knowledge” is the only valid form of knowledge, and that peoples everyday knowledge and experiences is secondary. The philosophy of AR is that the production of knowledge happens through solving real problems, where the researchers and oppressed people work together, thinking, analyzing and acting to solve these problems.

In Summary, Action Research principles are:

- Commitment to the most marginalized groups
- The marginalized groups determine the research agenda and are involved as co-investigators throughout the process
- Researchers must commit to work with democratic values and respect the knowledge of the people
- Scientific investigation, education and political action to challenge social inequality are all part of the research process
- Emphasizing real life experience and tangible results of process.

This course will explore Action Research in detail and work with students to implement its methods within their disciplines and apply them to a real life project.

The research projects will be closely tied to the teaching and research agendas of ESLARP faculty and graduate assistants, thereby securing the necessary support for undergraduates to engage in research projects. ESLARP’s existing relationships with community members and the knowledgebase of East St. Louis conditions and needs make actual research possible within the timeframe of a semester.

This semester the research project will be centered on continuing work (started Spring 07) of developing a comprehensive plan for the East St. Louis Park District. Included in this process will be:

- Implementation of adopt a park program developed in Fall 07
- Fundraising activities for out door fitness equipment

Research setting:

Residents of East St. Louis have experienced the consequences of Post-war industrial abandonment which led to loss of blue-collar jobs; white households and the black middle class moved out in large numbers and the population were reduced by over half and much of the leadership of the community was lost. With shrinking tax rolls, local government has abandoned many services that are commonplace in other communities. Employed residents continue to move to other communities that provide these basic amenities and population loss and distress continues in a downward spiral. Over half the residents live below the poverty level, and unemployment is around 30%. Almost two-thirds of the children in school are eligible for a free or reduced-price lunch. Many have elevated lead levels in their blood stream that affects their ability to learn and develop. While some of the housing stock is in good condition, much of it is derelict and creates deplorable living conditions for the poorest residents. Despite this bleak picture, the people of East St. Louis have shown a tremendous will to address problems themselves. Many residents are actively involved in neighborhood revitalization, and have partnered with students, staff and faculty at the University of Illinois through ESLARP for the past 20 years.

Course Objectives:

FAA 391 has been designed to assist students in achieving the following educational objectives:

1) Offer Undergraduate students the opportunity to gain research experience working in teams to address important urban problems undermining the quality of urban life. The goal is for student teams to generate research papers that will be submitted for presentation and/or publication. Research activities will include

literature reviews, establishing a valid research question, qualitative and/or quantitative data collection and analysis and the writing of a research paper.

2.) Introduce students to the principles and practice of Action Research as applied to real needs in the context of partnering with community based organizations in East St. Louis.

3.) Nurture and develop leadership skills in undergraduate students through partnerships with local East St. Louis leaders and mentor-relationships with ESLARP Graduate Assistants and Staff

3.) Expose students to critical economic, social, environmental, and political problems confronting residents of our state's most distressed urban neighborhoods, thereby encouraging continuous civic engagement.

Course Structure:

FAA 391 will apply the following main methods of instruction:

1) Lecture/discussion sessions: A weekly class where all students will participate in a lecture followed by discussion including the following broad topics:

- Action research (Methods and Theory)
- The context and history of East St. Louis
- ESLARP's model of service learning and action research

2) Weekly group sessions with allowing class time for the group projects. Students are also expected to work on projects outside of class. Instructors will also facilitate trips to meet with research partners in East St. Louis and assist students in moving their project forward in a timely fashion.

3) Field-work in East St. Louis, including participation in data collection efforts (recording physical conditions, interviews, surveys etc), participation in neighborhood and city-wide public meetings (including presentations and facilitation of discussions) and service projects aimed at relationship building with community partners.

Course Requirements:

- Must have Junior or Senior standing in respective departments to enroll.
- Regular attendance and active participation in each lecture/discussion class. Timely completion of all assigned readings and preparation for classroom
- Active participation in all East St. Louis fieldwork activities. (Travel expenses paid by ESLARP)
- Written contribution to the final paper. Written contribution to the planning document and presentation.

Course Grading:

Students will be graded based on the quality of their contribution to the final products:

Adopt a park implementation strategy (35%)

Fundraising plan for outdoor fitness equipment (35%)

Active participation in all class activities including field trips accounts for 30% of the grade.

Course Texts:

-Readings will be distributed in class

Class Schedule:

Expect some variations. Syllabus might change due to community needs.

Date:	Topic:	
1/15:	Class overview/syllabus/compass	(Janni & Bruce)
1/17	Arch401 07 (read compass)	(Janni & Bruce + students)
1/22	East St. Louis, Illinois (read Edwards & Lawson)	(Janni)
1/24:	Parks/Park district in ESL	(Bruce)
1/29:	ESLARP (read http://www.huduser.org/Periodicals/CITYSCPE/VOL5NUM1/reardon.pdf and www.eslarp.uiuc.edu)	(Janni)
1/31	Action Research origin and theory (read Kemmis; Reardon)	(Janni)
2/5	Structural inequality (read Aspen Institute)	(Janni)
2/7	Power and Empowerment (read VeneKlasen, Lisa and Valerie Miller)	(Janni)
2/12	Introducing semester projects – Fundraising for Outdoor fitness equipment (Bruce)	
2/14	Work shop day - work in groups to start fundraising project	
2/19	Introducing Semester Projects – Adopt a park (Janni) (read http://www.sjadoptapark.org/ http://www.seattle.gov/parks/volunteers/adoptapark.htm http://www.ci.tucson.az.us/tcb/docs/aapbrochure.pdf)	
2/21	Work shop day – work in groups to start Adopt a park project	
2/26	Preparing for out reach weekend	
2/28	Preparing for out reach weekend	
	2/29-3/01 First Outreach weekend (OUTREACH)	
3/04	Outreach weekend debriefing	

- 3/06 Guest Lecture – Laura Lawson, Landscape Architecture
- 3/11 Work shop day
- 3/13 Use of qualitative methods in park planning (Bruce)
- 3/18 & 3/20 Spring break*
- 3/25 Preparing for out reach weekend
- 3/27 Preparing for out reach weekend
- 3/28-29 Second Outreach weekend (community meeting)**
- 4/1 Debriefing on Outreach Weekend
- 4/3 Work Shop day
- 4/8 Work Shop day
- 4/10 Work Shop day
- 4/15 Dress rehearsal
- 4/17 Day trip to ESL for presentation to community partners**
- 4/22-24 Make changes based on Community feed back.
- 4/29 Students present final plan in class. Everything must be available in hardcopy and posted on Compass.