

RESEARCH METHODS for COMMUNITY CHANGE

A Project-Based Approach

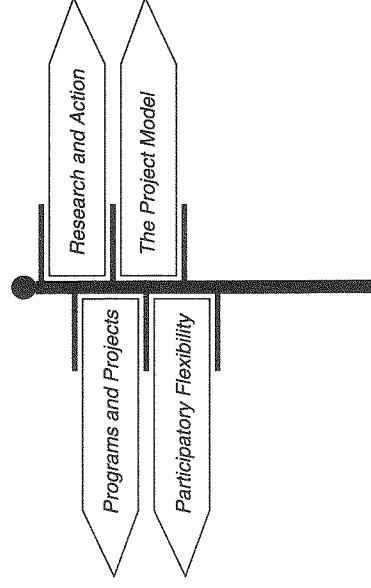
Randy Stoecker
University of Toledo

16. Lewin, K. (1948). In Gertrude W. Lewin (Ed.). *Resolving social conflicts: Selected papers on group dynamics*. New York: Harper & Row.
17. Whyte, W. F. (Ed.). (1991). *Participatory action research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
18. Strand, K., Marullo, N., Cutforth, N., Stoecker, R., & Donohue, P. (2003). *Community-based research and higher education: Principles and practices*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
19. Nyden, P., Figert, A., Shibley, M., & Burrows, D. (1997). *Building community: Social science in action*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
20. Suzuki, D. (2000). Hidden killer: portrait of an epidemic. *The Nature of things* [television broadcast]. CBC Television, Sunday, June 18. See also Alvord, L. A., & Van Pelt, E. C. (1999). *The scalpel and the silver bear*. New York: Bantam.
21. Centers for Disease Control. (2000). Navajo medical traditions and HPS. Retrieved July 15, 2004, from <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hanta/hps/noframes/navajo.htm>
22. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2002). Chronic disease reports and notes, 15 (1). Retrieved July 15, 2004, from http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/cdnr/cdnr_winter0207.htm

Three

Head and Hand Together

A Project-Based Research Model



THE HEAD AND HAND SPLIT

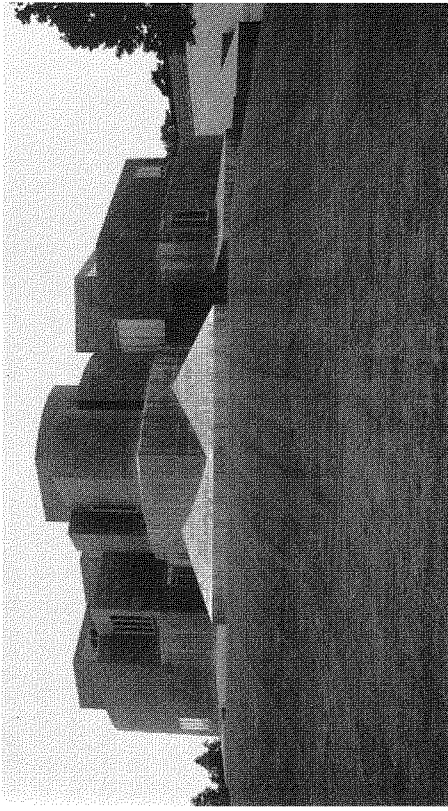
I grew up in a working-class family, with one of those fathers who came home dirty from head to toe every evening from fixing

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.

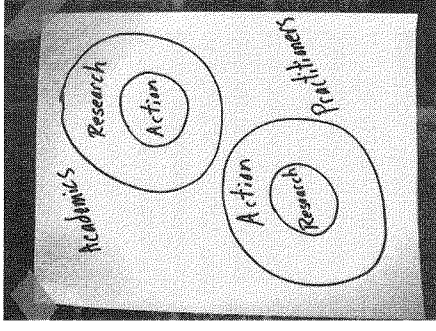
For those of you who see the world first through the eyes of a researcher, we will begin from an unexpected angle—the project. For it is important to understand that research plays only a supporting role in the project-based research model. When I do training workshops in community-based research I often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