

On and Off Campus: Learning in the Context of Democracy and Discomfort

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“Local Knowledge: Community, Media Activism and the Environment”

Our program emerges from the perspective that the community base of knowledge is important and needs to be acknowledged and supported. In these days of globalization, fast-paced media, mass marketing and celebrity, what people in diverse communities around the world know at a local level is often trivialized or ignored. “Local Knowledge” will involve an exploration of the dynamics of community life—our program will evolve through collaborative efforts with people in our region as they work to sustain and empower their communities. Our focus on the local will not be uncritical or romantic. Communities can be isolated or isolating; they can be exclusionary; they can compete in unhealthy ways with other communities near and far. And, of course, communities are not homogeneous; their various diversities are reflected in both the vitality and stress of community life. It will be important for us to be open and reflective about all that we are about to experience and learn as a group.” (Overview of “Local Knowledge: Community, Media Activism and the Environment,” a full-time, yearlong program at The Evergreen State College)

“Local Knowledge,” a program conceived and taught by a teacher from media arts and another from environmental studies, convened two weeks after September 11, 2001, the moment being marked as the point in time when “everything has changed.” Our yearlong program had been constructed with attention to local/global connections, variable and conflicting constructions of reality, and the relationships among knowledge, authority, and democracy in community. The world now is painfully rich with repercussions and unexpected consequences. For all of us as educators, as citizens, our life’s work will be ever more riveted on context, especially if we make an effort to connect campus community and the broader community. Even the word “community” has taken on many more nuances and translations in the wake of the 9/11 tragedy. The United States is congratulating itself for coming together as “one, big community,” while communities—both in faraway places and down the block—shudder in anticipation of official proclamations of resolve. This time will be a very challenging one to connect the life of the mind (as teacher, as student) with the work of being alive in community.

The Emergence of Community-Based Research

“Local Knowledge,” along with some other programs and classes at various colleges and universities, charted its course in relationship to a broad framework or movement identified as Community-based Research (CBR). With legacies and links that range from the popular education of Paulo Freire to academia’s action or applied research to networks of participatory researchers from India to Appalachia, CBR is in its most inclusive depiction, “research by, with, or for the community.” There is no one model, no trademark or secret handshake that signifies what CBR is; but there does seem to be a gravitational center for this work.

The Evergreen State College is Washington’s newest public baccalaureate college, founded in 1967 with a mission of innovation. Since its opening in 1971, Evergreen has offered its entire curriculum organized not around courses, but rather around team-taught, interdisciplinary programs of “coordinated study.” Evergreen is among the few public colleges created during the 1960s that has sustained its alternative curriculum and values, and it continues to play an innovative, forward-thinking role in higher education. Today, the college serves 4,000 students, mostly undergraduates, with just over 200 students enrolled in graduate-level teaching, environmental studies, and public administration programs. Most students attend the college’s main campus in Olympia; there are three off-campus programs: one serves Tacoma’s urban adult population; another, the reservation-based program at five tribal communities where the classes are held; and the third is located at Grays Harbor Community College. Evergreen’s 170 full-time faculty all work collaboratively in teaching teams that usually change from year to year. No teaching is delegated to teaching assistants. Faculty members are hired and evaluated based on their teaching ability, rather than on their record of research and publishing.

Evergreen has no academic departments. Each year, a new curriculum is built by faculty working in six curricular planning groups: Culture, Text and Language; Scientific Inquiry; Environmental Studies; Expressive Arts; Society, Politics, Behavior and Change; and the Northwest Native American and World Indigenous Peoples Studies. Students receive narrative evaluations rather than grades, and design their own academic emphasis and path of study. There are no prescribed majors or course requirements, yet studies of student transcripts reveal that Evergreen students pursue a diverse, liberal arts experience at the college. Evergreen's curriculum and teaching stress the following core foci: interdisciplinary learning, collaboration, personal engagement, linking theory and practice, and learning across significant differences. Experiential learning (both through academic programs and internships) and community-based and service-learning have been always been strong threads in the Evergreen fabric. Lin Nelson is a member of the faculty at The Evergreen State College, where her work focuses on health, environment, and community.

The Loka Institute (www.loka.org), based in Amherst, Massachusetts, was founded in 1987, driven by the concern about the breach between democracy and science/technology. "Loka" is derived from the ancient Sanskrit, *lokasamgraha*; its meaning includes the following: unity of the world; interconnectedness of society; the duty to perform action for the benefit of the world. Those who founded the Loka Institute wanted to find and create alternatives that engaged citizens in public decision-making over the nature and application of knowledge. They looked to the "consensus" model applied in Denmark where panels of citizens were gathered for quiet, protracted deliberations over developments, for example, in food safety and biotech, before these developments became simply business-as-usual. Also, Loka looked to and began collaborating with the "Dutch Science Shops." First launched in 1974, there are now thirty-three Science Shops in eleven Dutch universities, which mediate and arrange community-linked research projects in fields such as biology, chemistry, law, and social science.

In 1995, Loka moved to form, host, and help guide the Community Research Network (CRN), a network of CBR grassroots practitioners, universities and colleges, research institutes, government agencies and funders. In their report on the fourth Annual CRN Conference (July 2001 in Austin, Texas) "Re-Shaping the Culture of Research: People, Participation, Partnerships, and Practical Tools," Loka staff offered this profile:

Community-based research is based upon the principles of participation and partnership. It puts affected communities in the driver's seat for finding solutions to the problems they face. Recent movies such as *A Civil Action* and *Erin Brokovich* have shown how such citizen action can lead to positive change in a community. There are, however, hundreds of communities around the country that are involved in research to solve problems of environmental health, economic development, racial injustice, and agricultural sustainability that are not shown on the big screen. These are the people that make up the Community Research Network. (Loka report, 8/8/01, www.loka.org)

I believe that the Community Research Network can serve as a very stimulating reference point for educators as they work to enrich the efforts of campus learning communities in collaboration with other communities both near and far. CRN is struggling with everything from the strategic challenges of negotiating collaborative projects to the methodological quagmire of "what is objective" about such projects. Equally important, there is a lively and uneasy (as there should be) consideration of the ethical challenges of working with community; just because a project has the moniker "community" slapped on it, does not make it just, equitable, or effective. To convey a little more of the diversity of participation and perspective, I'll provide a brief profile of a few of the projects and initiatives that reflect the substance and direction of CBR. Then I'll move on to how I've seen students work to engage with research in and with communities.

Regarding Knowledge in the Community: Some Significant Examples

Community-based research, as described by its participants and partisans, is guided by principles of parity, mutuality, and community self-determination. While often undertaken in relationship with higher education, CBR is not solely

authored by the academy. On the contrary, many communities are working to make science, research, and the construction of knowledge more democratic, more alive in their lives; they see themselves—and are recognized—as the “Principle Investigator.” They may invite (selectively) official researchers (from higher education, the government, institutes) as partners, not as benefactors or beneficiaries. While there is clearly a connection with traditional campus-based (and sometimes campus-driven) service-learning, many of those involved in CRN express impatience and resistance toward varieties of service-learning that are paternalistic and certainly toward campus-determined research that is “done to” the community. An academic presence that conveys “we have the knowledge, the resources, the right and the righteousness” is clearly a barrier to the maturity and sustainability that community participants are looking for in these relationships. Dramatic displays of guilt or pity toward “the academic unwashed” will clearly signal an undemocratic relationship. Student involvement in these more collaborative, community-determined projects of education and research is especially challenging, but probably has more staying-power for the students and for the community.

Nowhere is this conviction about community self-determination more the case than with the environmental research that has emerged from the Akwesasne Mohawk Nation, on the St. Lawrence River at the U.S./Canadian border. Paralleling the “housewife researchers” and “barefoot epidemiologists” just west of them at Love Canal, community members in the late 1970s began examining the impacts of pollution from nearby General Motors, Alcoa, Reynolds, paper mills, and the whole environmental predicament in the Great Lakes region. Before CBR became something of a buzzword, Akwesasne residents undertook a very difficult and daring project to investigate possible health impacts and engage regional researchers who might be able to effectively and respectfully work with them. From their earliest work on family health (particularly that of nursing mothers and babies) to ongoing work on food security and social impacts, Akwesasne research has evolved into one of the most impressive long-term projects, engaging researchers (including students) from the State University of New York (Syracuse and Albany campuses), Cornell, and others with community youth, midwives, elders, and scientists.

At a recent Town Meeting held fall 2000 in Seattle, organized by university and community advocates, keynote speaker Dr. Ken Olden, director of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, noted that the Akwesasne project is an inspiring leader in its role as Principle Investigator and effective negotiator between community and scientist. (Go to www.niehs.nih.gov to learn about funding for CBR-type projects in environmental health.) The community bridges indigenous knowledge with pedigreed science, particularly through some of the youth who work in the homegrown laboratory, go off to college and return to be scientists in the community. And it guides research projects through the “good research agreement,” which insists on respect, equity, and empowerment, while reserving the right to “withdraw consent to use or release information” that is insensitive or harmful to the community. (Visit www.slic.com/atfe/atfe.htm for information about the work of the Akwesasne Taskforce on the Environment,

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including the Protocol for Reviewing Research Proposals). This signifies a much strengthened standard for community-campus-governance relationships.

Consider another effort: the Policy Research Action Group (PRAG), a partnership of four urban universities (Loyola, DePaul, Chicago State, University of Illinois) and seventeen grassroots organizations. *PRAGmatics: The Journal of Community-Based Research* provides evidence of the range of work that can be done and how CBR is an ever-moving target, involving complex and changing arrangements between campus and community. One of the most moving examples of how PRAG has impacted teaching and learning is the story of Cathy Shanley, professor of chemistry at Loyola University. Looking for a way to enhance the “social relevance of chemistry” and in particular attract more students of color to the sciences, she took up PRAG’s invitation to teach her students instrument analysis by undertaking the analysis of urban lead exposure in Chicago. She and her students began collaborating with community organizations, such as Centro Sin Fronteras, and K-12 students and teachers to help make science matter more—to the students, to the community. She has conveyed how her own thinking and that of her students has been challenged and deepened; “inconclusive findings” may certainly call for more research, but the community may at the same time seek to apply findings in a precautionary way, while the science marches on. PRAG stands as one of the CBR efforts that is most institutionalized, well resourced, and vital. (Go to www.luc.edu/depts/curl/prag to learn more about these community collaborations.)

The Community Research Network (CRN) is increasingly characterized by the encouragement of youth in community research and for the African, Latin, Asian, and Native American (ALANA) Caucus, which “supports the recovery and reconstruction of the history of communities of color committed to the notion of knowledge in the service of community.” (Loka Report on 2001 conference). One of the most compelling presentations at the recent Texas gathering was by a few high school students and a recent college graduate from the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development who had researched the prospects for local enterprises. Their work led to the creation of the Spanish Immersion Institute of South Texas, a community-based education and cultural exchange project emerging from the students studying and acting on the knowledge base in their hometown.

Another feature of the CRN is the effort to build capacity and funding by activating the network to look at national legislation and K-12/higher education initiatives. The Network was recently successful in getting House Bill HR 1858, the Science and Mathematics Partnerships Act, to include community-based organizations as potential partners. Loka and the emerging CRN do not have all the answers; there are many impassioned debates about whether and how to do collaborative education and research. It is a risky business. But colleges and universities that withdraw from the context also take the risk of being cloistered or fortified in their distance from the challenges of everyday democracy.

While some argue that the university should be insulated from real-world problems, increasingly universities are being called upon to apply their vast knowledge and research resources to the

solution of critical societal problems . . . University research is more and more offered to the highest bidder, whether in business or government. Research done on behalf of civil society rather than for the state or market is rare, not least because funding for it is also rare. . . To respond to this challenge successfully, universities will have to do more than shift their research priorities. Researching for democracy also implies democratizing research, a shift that poses a fundamental challenge to many university-based researchers. At the heart of the problem of linking research and democracy is not only the question, “Whose voices are strengthened by university research?” but also, “Who participates in research in the first place?” (Ansley, Fran, and John Gaventa. 1997. *Researching for Democracy and Democratizing Research. Doing Community-Based Research: A Reader*. Loka Institute.)

Efforts at Evergreen

How does all of this affect us in our classes? As noted above, the 2001-02 program “Local Knowledge” is partly shaped by our learning from and connection to the CBR movement, as we work in collaboration with neighboring communities here in South Puget Sound, Washington state. Evergreen’s unusual curricular structure is shaped around interdisciplinary, team-taught programs that can be full-time ventures for up to a whole academic year—that is, faculty and students can be working on complex thematic challenges through a sixteen-credit, one-quarter program and up to a three-quarter, forty-eight-credit program. These kinds of programs offer the opportunity for the emergence of a supportive learning community. It is possible for that learning community to really challenge itself (both students and faculty) to develop the analytic, strategic, and ethical capacity for this kind of work. And it’s possible for such a learning community to more fully immerse itself, over many months, in collaborative efforts with neighboring communities.

Of course, opportunity, capacity, and possibility are not always borne out—here at Evergreen or anywhere else. There are serious emotional, logistical, litigious, and ethical risks in this kind of learning and doing. Students need to respectfully acknowledge the opportunity and realize that the learning community/service-learning effort entails much more than their own learning and gratification. Teachers should not feel surprised at feeling “on” for “24/7” as students embark on complex community projects calling for steady, but non-intrusive support. Faculty, staff, and administration—here at Evergreen and everywhere else—have to continually and honestly come to grips with the possibility that their forays into service-learning and/or community-based research can still be experienced as an “academic drive-by” that offers little that is sustaining to the community beyond the campus perimeter. There are other pitfalls—communal smugness (a learning community too taken with itself); community-envy (a learning community wanting to barge in on another more—“real” or “exotic” community); regional parochialism (campus or community boosterism that borders on jingoism)—that might materialize in the course of “doing community” on and off campus. Even when we have shaped opportunities to do good work (as I think many of our programs allow here at Evergreen), it’s crucial that we be honestly tuned in to the complexities—structural to ethical—that characterize and haunt this work.

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“Local Knowledge: Community, Media Activism, and the Environment”

This forty-eight-credit, three-quarter-long program, taught in 2001-02 to upper-division undergraduates, bridged environmental, community, and media studies. It examined the dynamic of community life, developed collaborative strategies and explored global-to-local linkages that offer opportunities for sustainable community development. The program drew on popular education and the work of Paulo Freire, Myles Horton at the Highlander Education and Research Center, and the community-based research of the Loka Institute. There was a strong emphasis on the complexities of representation, the construction of stories, images, and documents and the ethical challenges intrinsic to community-based research. Critical viewing and creation of video work was central. The readings ranged across particular materials reflective of four local communities that the program is linked to; at the same time, readings included broad analysis (*The Case Against the Global Economy and for a Turn toward the Local* by Mander and Goldsmith) and comparative case studies (*No Safe Place* by Brown and Mikkelsen). Student team projects included: the impact of big-box stores on small towns, public reaction to wastewater processes and policies, community dialogues on war and peace, homelessness and community response, sustaining community arts. Credit was awarded in community studies, media analysis, video production, research methodology, environmental policy, and local history.

As I anticipate the agonies and ecstasies of this new program “Local Knowledge” (see sidebar), I’m also looking back to—and learning from—students I have just worked with in a program with the straightforward title—“Community-Based Research” (sidebar, page 37). This sixteen-credit, one-quarter program (taught in spring of 2001) had three essential features. First, we immersed ourselves in the literature and networks that directly and indirectly spoke to research in and with communities (from traditional social science approaches to muckraking journalism to the CBR network). Our attention ranged from the broadly philosophical and ethical to the nuts-and-bolts; my intention was to provide a welcoming, if unsettling, orientation to students, many of them about to graduate, so they could think critically about their current and future work in this context. Second, each student, preferably as part of a team, worked with a community organization on a research project. These projects were complex and varied in their scope and in their success. Third, the group was expected to pay special attention to and help nourish our learning as a group. This is what I want to pay attention to now.

Students can thrive by participating in CBR-type projects; they are enlivened by a strong dose of the dailiness of research, tempered by a healthy blend of humility and confidence, and charged by the demands of accountability, communal sensibility, and respect. But this does not come easily. The teacher who takes this on does not have all the answers, and students definitely need to know this. My students saw me struggle with everything from logistics to anxiety about community fallout to sometimes not seeing the forest for the trees. Early on, I told them that they had to work with me to teach the class. And that although we had only a short ten-week journey together, although some of them felt very new to the idea of CBR, and despite some of them feeling that I was shirking my teacher responsibilities, we would have two whole weeks of student-constructed and led workshops. After considerable anguish and many smaller discussions outside of class, we came up with a list of “teaching moments” that the students, in groups of two or three, would lead for the rest of us. Everyone’s anxiety aside, this proved to be some of the most significant work we did together. My question was simple: “What do you need to know to do this work—here this quarter in this class and in your future?” Of the many fine workshops that evolved, two were most generative for us all, one on ethics, another on community mapping. At the quarter’s end, virtually every student commented how these two workshops taught them so much—informed them, humbled them, strengthened them.

The Ethics of Community-based Research

The first student workshop was created to make things more clear and more muddy at the same time; that is, the workshop guides wanted the class to cultivate a sharper awareness of how research can be experienced as invasive by the community and yet to patiently recognize that ethical challenges may be “thick” (hard to penetrate and opaque) and persistent. Although CBR is intended to democratize education and research and bring parity to campus-community relationships, some of the students harbored serious doubts about whether this was possible. They wondered if academic-based folks (however well intended)

would know when they might be violating the trust, security, or future of a community. This concern emerged from (1) a project two students were involved with that brought attention to an environmental hazard that most of the community didn't seem to want to know about (precisely because the hazard was so worrisome), and (2) the observation that mainstream social science, despite Human Subject Reviews, and much CBR-type work, still does not seem to be articulating principles that put community first. While some student workshop leaders gave the class a demanding homework assignment in preparation for the workshop, this group just told us to "bring in three things that tell us something special about you." All a bit mystified, most of us took some care in bringing in significant objects (keepsakes, photos, personal icons).

The student workshop leaders, with cool detachment, led us through a long series of increasingly personal and invasive questions. With each "yes" in response to these questions, we were to give up one of our valued belongings; when we ran out, we were to turn over anything else on hand . . . money, lunches, jewelry. The class became restive and annoyed. We had all envisioned a different sort of discussion. After this protracted interrogation, the workshop leaders gathered up all the valued belongings, gave us some obscure assignment to work on and left the room. Finally, they returned and asked us the following: "What do you think just happened here? What questions made you feel uncomfortable? How do you think this compares to CBR? Can you see any symbolism in our actions?"

What followed was one of the most raw, heartfelt, and revealing discussions I've been involved in about what it's like "to be researched," how community members might feel in relation to seemingly benevolent researchers, and what self-protective emotions and strategies were beginning to emerge even in this abbreviated, constructed experience. The workshop leaders then let us in on their thinking, their conversations with contacts in the Loka Institute (who themselves continue to struggle with the ethics question), and their challenge to us to frame a set of guiding principles.

I could not have shaped this workshop in the same way. It had to come from the students' learning community, from their honest criticism and reflection on whether and how to proceed with this kind of work. The emotional and ethical undertow from this hours-long workshop stayed with us through the rest of the quarter.

Community Mapping

The other workshop was provoked by a student trying to answer his own question and pulling everyone else along with him: "How can I presume to participate in community research, when I don't even know—or pay little attention to—my community (whatever that is)?" He joined with another student to create a complex assignment. "Community Assessment and Community Building." This involved students taking a long list of questions and answering them as best they could while wandering around the community they currently call home. Here is a sampling of questions: "What are the defining boundaries of your neighborhood? What is the focal point, gathering point, or identifying

"Community-Based Research"

This sixteen-credit, quarter-long program, taught in spring 2001 to senior-level undergraduates, explored how researchers study community life and how research emerges from the life of the community. One of the main frames for this program was "participatory research," when non-experts become active researchers in a quest to better understand and impact conditions around them. Readings ranged from the analysis of democracy and science (Alan Irwin. 1995. *Citizen Science: A Study of People, Expertise and Sustainable Development*. London, NY: Routledge.) to applications (Center for Public Integrity. 2000. *Citizen Muckraking: How to Investigate and Right Wrongs in Your Community*. Monroe, ME: Common Courage Media.). Students were exposed to a range of approaches, documents and community models; they collaborated and/or consulted with community researchers and advocates in undertaking a number of projects that ranged across concerns from ecological sustainability to welfare rights to working conditions. The program awarded credit in community studies, research methodology, participatory research, environmental policy, and social organizations/movements.

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feature? What do you know about the history of your neighborhood? What makes your neighborhood the way it is?” Students were also instructed to draw a detailed map of the neighborhood/community. A range of natural, built, and social features were provided as prompts for the map-builders. Students were also surveyed about which kinds of communities they considered themselves to be a part of (e.g., geographical, religious/spiritual, virtual).

This raw material was chewed on and interpreted by the group, over several hours, with the facilitation of the two workshop leaders. There were many revelations regarding what people do and don’t pay attention to, the clash of natural/social features, patterns of inclusion/exclusion in community, and the emotional texture (fear, longing, playfulness, dread) that shapes consideration of where people live and whether they believe they—and others—belong. The discussion was so interesting that we altered our class schedule so that the work could continue into the next day. Workshop leaders also brought to our attention all sorts of projects—from New York City to Indonesia—that had to do with community mapping.

Several students commented on how effective this workshop proved to be. The workshop leaders seemed gratified that they had been able to construct a learning environment that proved to be so helpful. Other students felt they’d gained a lot of insights into each other’s skills, how much they take for granted about knowing a community, and came to see how they need to continually re-examine how they and others are “seeing” into community. Again, I was not the originator of this workshop; I did spend time with the workshop leaders supporting their efforts. But frankly, I had taken for granted their notions and knowledge of community.

Clearly, if students as a learning community are going to embark on complex journeys with the broader community, they need to have the time and space to pose and examine their own questions. Other workshop efforts addressed the context for CBR/community service work; that is, a number of students wanted to explore the following: “What is this thing called Civil Society? How do non-governmental and community-based organizations get created, sustained, funded, and sometimes put to rest? How would I work in this environment? Could I find a job that would involve CBR-type work? What are the political implications of the Non-Governmental Organization sector for democracy and governance?” These and other questions were taken on in other student-led workshops.

Closing

When I participated in the recent Community Research Network conference, I told people there about my experiences as a teacher working with students struggling to work with communities; I told them especially about the student-run workshops. Several students came up and revealed their need to talk about the “E” word. Ethics, sometimes thought to be easier if you consider yourself to be a community-connected person, proves to be a continuing intellectual, emotional, and strategic challenge. Students inhabit a difference space than faculty, they reminded me. Their lives are shaped by shifting power relations between faculty, staff, students, and community. Some of them are from the very communities they

are now working with; for some their shift from “the kid down the street” to “the college student doing research” subjected them to doubt—both self-doubt and a doubting stance from once neighborly neighbors.

There are no quick solutions for approaching and trying to minimize the divides of academia/community or science/society or research/democracy. I had no easy remedies for these inquiring and earnest students. I did feel heartened that they were being so carefully reflective. As noted in another paper in this collection (Eaton and Patton, chap. 9), Dewey (and others from various perspectives) reminds us that reflection involves “doubt, hesitation, perplexity, mental difficulty.” I complimented those students working to take community-based research so seriously that they were showing the healthy signs of discomfort.

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