

## 22. Document from Community-Based Research Training: “Putting the ‘Research’ into Research Service Learning”

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### What is research?

According to the Random House Dictionary, “research” is “diligent and systematic inquiry into a subject in order to discover or revise facts, theories, etc.” There is nothing in the definition of research that limits its practice to any specific discipline or methodology, or even to the realm of academia; in fact, we likely engage in some sort of research every day of our lives. This does not mean that each day, we necessarily initiate an academic project; rather, it simply means that we follow a process that adheres to the basic logic and framework of research:

1. *We pose a question.* There is something that puzzles us, or a subject about which we wish to know more.

*Example*—“What are the greatest needs facing the youth of the neighborhood served by a certain community organization?”

2. *We choose or develop an investigative approach to answering the question.* Once we have identified the problem we want to solve or the question we want to answer, we choose or develop a methodology through which, to conduct our investigation. The range of methodologies that can fall under the rubric of “research” is as vast as the range of questions that can be researched. Continuing with the example from above:

*Example*—Conduct focus groups and a series of interviews with community leaders and community youth to determine what the primary needs are of youth in the community.

3. *We conduct our research.* Over a given period of time, we gather data/findings through execution of the research process.

4. *We analyze our data.*

*Example*—In focus groups and in individual interviews, community youth and adults alike expressed their belief that a neighborhood park is urgently needed. Throughout the group meetings and interviews, repeated reference was made to a group of adjacent, vacant lots at the center of the neighborhood that appear to offer an ideal locale for the construction of a park.

5. *We synthesize our data and form conclusions.*

*Example*—The community organization should support the construction of a neighborhood park. The organization should direct its funds towards the purchase of the group of vacant lots in the center of the neighborhood, and convert those vacant lots into green space for the proposed park.

### **Research in the Research Service Learning Context**

The research we do in the context of Research Service Learning (RSL), follows these same basic principles of problem identification, methodology selection, execution of research, analysis and synthesis. Yet there are specific attributes of our research that set it apart from traditional academic research:

**1. Our research is *community-based, participatory and action-oriented*.**

RSL draws on two “alternative” research paradigms that are gaining increasing public attention, even in traditional research universities: “community-based research” and “participatory action research.”

*Community-based research* is research conducted “by, with, or for communities.”

By “communities,” we mean more specifically, organizations that are rooted in and form an organic part of the communities in which they are present: civic or neighborhood groups, grassroots community organizations, community-centered nonprofits and activist organizations. Within the context of RSL, we always conduct our research in partnership with such organizations.

*Participatory action research* is research that is focused on finding answers to questions and developing solutions to problems of immediate and practical importance to communities and community groups. In contrast to much typical, academic research, it is “participatory” in that those who have the problem (the community or community group) are not mere “objects” to be studied in an effort of the researcher alone. In a RSL project, we work *with* the community or community group to identify the problem/question, choose the research methodology and execute the research. Rather than standing apart from the organization and studying it in a disconnected, objectified format, we embed ourselves *within* the community/community organization to achieve a participatory vantage point (Wadsworth 1998; Masters 1995).

Participatory action research—and SOL RSL research—is “action-oriented” in the sense that its explicit purpose is to find answers and develop solutions to problems of immediate and practical importance to the community/community organization. Traditional academic research often seems to hold such action as a tangential goal, or the researcher simply expresses his or her *hope* that the research will “perhaps one day contribute to” some direct action. In a SOL RSL project, action is central, not tangential; indeed, our research can be viewed as the first step in an action process to be completed after we depart (when recommendations are implemented, findings are used to inform the design of a new program, etc.)

**2. We do not seek to eliminate our subjective insights from the research process.**

From our vantage point as interns, we gain unique insights into our community organizations’ relations to the problem at hand and to the communities in which they are embedded. Rather than discount the insight gained from this subjective perspective, we view it as an *asset*. Through critical reflection during the research process and in the period of analysis, we can glean insights that may prove useful in the final synthesis. This is *not* to say that we use our personal biases to distort findings; rather, we identify our subjective insights as such when we utilize them to inform our conclusions/final recommendations.

As researchers, we integrate our critical reflections into our projects in a manner appropriate to the specific methodology we are employing. For example, insights gleaned during a documentary-based project would inform our conclusions—and be presented in a certain way in relation to the “data”—that would be quite different from the presentation of such insights alongside findings gleaned from a quantitative environmental impact study.

### **3. RSL is a *service learning* experience.**

RSL projects engage us in *service learning*. Service learning is:

A form of experiential education that merges the pursuit of student learning activities with those that address significant needs within the community. . . . the goal of service learning is a dynamic partnership between educational institutions and communities' that results in the mutual benefits of learning and meaningful service. (Schaffer and Peterson 1998)

“Research,” as defined above, is the vehicle through which we engage in service learning. The “learning” in our research service learning projects takes place on two planes:

1. *We locate ourselves within or in relation to efforts to promote social change.*

Like all SOL interns, students engaging in RSL projects gain experience on the “frontlines” of current social change efforts. Through placement with service and activist organizations, we gain insight into strategies being used to confront community challenges and prominent social issues, and, through critical reflection, we locate our place within and in relation to efforts to promote social change.

2. *We refine our research skills in contexts where the impact of the research efforts is visible and immediate.* Through the process of designing and conducting a research service learning project, we hone our critical research skills—a “learning goal” that RSL projects share with student research projects in more traditional academic settings. Yet unlike the research projects students

carry out in traditional academic settings, where the impact and importance of students' research is often not immediately apparent, our RSL projects have a practical, immediate impact through contribution to the advancement of our host organizations' social change efforts.