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Integrating Community Engaged Research Into Existing School of Education Graduate Research Courses

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INTEGRATING COMMUNITY ENGAGED RESEARCH INTO EXISTING SCHOOL
OF EDUCATION GRADUATE RESEARCH COURSES

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ABSTRACT

This article outlines the importance of Community Engaged Research, and how it can be embedded into an existing Master of Science in Education degree program at Dominican University of California. Community Engaged Research rejects the traditional research model, opting instead for a dialogic approach to research.

Both the community and the researchers must participate in the analysis process as data is irrelevant without considering the context in which the data was discovered. When evaluating the role of service in education, Community Engaged Research provides a clear connection between educators, students and the community in a service oriented way. An ideal balance will come from creating a curriculum which allows for and supports Community Engaged Research, but does not require it.

INTRODUCTION

With President Obama's call for national service it is imperative that educators look within their own boundaries for ways in which service can be provided. Schools of Education, particularly teacher preparation programs, are particularly well positioned to engage both their students and their communities in service based work. Community Engaged Research is one of the ways in which a School of Education can do this, particularly at the graduate level. This article outlines the importance of Community Engaged Research, and how it can be embedded into an existing Master of Science in Education degree program at Dominican University of California.

COMMUNITY ENGAGED RESEARCH

Community Engaged Research takes the concept of service learning to a higher order within the academic world. In traditional research, researchers establish an area of interest based on their own needs and experience. Researchers then take their research agenda out into the community if applicable, and conduct research on the community, using their chosen methods. Once the research is finalized, researchers might share their findings with the community. However it is not the job of researchers to apply those findings to solutions for the community if relevant information is discovered. This method does not take the context of the community or its needs into account, and does little to benefit the community under study.

Community Engaged Research rejects this model, opting instead for a dialogic approach to research. Researchers and community members work together to determine the research agenda based on both the needs of the community, problems that need to be solved, or issues that need to be understood, as well as the needs of the scholars, contributing to the existing body of knowledge in a meaningful way.

Researchers who undertake investigations through the lens of civic engagement may see their social responsibility as paramount and, as a consequence, they may gravitate towards those models of research that turn on action, incorporate service and research, and that are driven as much by the participants as they are by the investigators whose expertise actually may be limited by the controls and rigor colleagues in the academy may prize. (Moxley, 2004, p. 236)

Once the research agenda is decided, researchers take the lead to determine appropriate methods in which to approach the research, with input from the community members to avoid any conflict or negative disruption. Researchers conduct the research using the agreed upon methods, and then bring the findings back to the community for analysis. Both the community and the researchers must participate in the analysis process as data is irrelevant without considering the context in which the data was discovered. Once the analysis is complete, researchers and community members work together once again to determine solutions and outcomes to the issues considered in the research, with the ultimate goal being solutions to problems and change in the community (Small & Uttal, 2005).

When evaluating the role of service in education, Community Engaged Research provides a clear connection between educators, students and the community in a service oriented way. Students, particularly graduate students, need to learn how to conduct research, and actually complete a research project. If they utilize the Community Engaged Research method, students have an opportunity to not only learn how to conduct research, but can also make a difference in their communities through the research they conduct.

DEVELOPING CURRENT EDUCATION RESEARCH COURSES

At Dominican University of California in the School of Education's Master of Science in Education degree program, all students complete a master's thesis or project. This is done over three semester long courses with each course guiding the student through their research goals. The three courses are: Research Methods, Proposal Development and Directed Research. In addition to the core research courses, Masters and Credential students may also participate in Community Engaged Research through the Courage to Transform course, in conjunction with the Teach With Africa program.

Research Methods

The first course in the research series is Research Methods. The purpose of this course is to ground students in the expectations of graduate level research. Students are currently guided through qualitative and quantitative research methods, and put together an annotated bibliography based on their research interests. To integrate the concept of Community Engaged Research into Research Methods would be relatively simple. A supplementary hand out on Community Engaged Research, or Participatory Research would need to be added to the required reading. The faculty member should be trained in service based learning so that as questions arise from the students, the faculty member would be able to handle them. This would also be the point where students should begin speaking with community members to get a better sense of potential research agendas. As a part of the annotated bibliography students should include articles regarding issues relevant to their community, as well as their potential research topic.

Proposal Development

The next course in the research process is Proposal Development. Once students have completed their Research Methods course, they should have a basic idea of possible research

topics for their study. The next step would be to interview an expert, which is already an assignment within the Proposal Development course. This interview could be a dialogue between the student and a key community member in order to determine their clear research agenda. Once the student has identified their research topic with the community, they determine the best methods in which to complete their research and submit the appropriate Institute Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects application. Once the IRBPHS application is approved the student can begin his or her research to collect findings.

Directed Research

The final course in the research process is Directed Research. During the semester of Directed Research, students begin writing up their thesis based on the annotated bibliography (completed in semester 1), the interview(s) (completed in semester 1 and/or 2), and their findings (completed in semester 2). At this point it is necessary to return to the community to analyze the data within the context of the community being studied, and the relevance to the literature review. The student works with the community to analyze the data, and come to some conclusions about results and future actions. Once this is done, the student is ready to write their discussion and conclusion sections of their thesis.

Courage to Transform

A unique option for students in the credential and master's programs is the opportunity to participate in the Teach With Africa program, under the direction of Dr. Rande Webster. Several students are selected to spend a period of time living in Cape Town, South Africa, and teaching in what is referred to as the LEAP Schools. These schools serve student from the townships, who typically have limited access to quality education. Dominican students work with teachers,

community members and students to infuse teaching methods that serve to enhance student knowledge in all subjects, but particularly mathematics and science.

The after effects of apartheid are still present, emphasizing that the achievement of higher education is imperative for the success of the population of South Africa. One of the township students' barriers to university access is their inability to pass a test that includes advance science and math concepts that are not taught in township schools. With the goal of more township students gaining access to university, the LEAP Schools and Courage to Transform students focus on math and science concepts.

This joint project provides an opportunity to design research that utilizes the community engaged method. Students are expected to research the history and current needs of their community, to interview key people who are shaping the education offered through the LEAP Schools, and apply their findings to the process of curriculum development. The final curriculum that is developed will fit within the context of the complex cultural situation in South Africa and promote inquiry and student engagement in learning.

CONCLUSION

In the context of today's economy and culture, service learning continues to grow in importance. Universities must continue to push boundaries and break through the traditional ivy covered walls that keep them separate from their surrounding communities. As a School of Education with graduate students already poised to do relevant research, we can contribute greatly to this effort by making a few small changes to our existing curriculum. In addition to the University support of students interested in doing Community Engaged Research, it is also necessary that a culture shift occur where faculty members doing this type of research are also supported. Community Engaged Research must be included in tenure and promotion evaluations

just as other research and publications are considered if faculty members are expected to support

this type of work (Gelmon & Agre-Kippenhan, 2002). Translating this to other departments and

fields would be easy to do, especially once our methods are clearly set in place and working well

within our community. Every student does not need to be required to participate in this type of

research, especially since you run the risk of tapping out community good will, time and energy,

even when all research is done in a dialogic way. An ideal balance will come from creating a

curriculum which allows for and supports Community Engaged Research, but does not require it.

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