As an emerging, somewhat contested application of scholarship, community-based research (CBR) has been bandied about at conferences, in journals, and universities, especially in the last five years. Kerry Strand, Sam Marullo, Nick Cutforth, Randy Stoecker and Patrick Donahue’s new book, *Community-Based Research and Higher Education* (2003), signals a new stage for this participatory approach, delivering a comprehensive blueprint for the future of campuses, communities, and their collaboration. The authors assume the necessary task of uniting the nomadic threads of CBR’s origins and combined experience of those employing the methodology, taking out a definitive name and brand of participative research and pedagogy. CBR has as its broadest goal a more just, equitable, and sustainable society. “Community-based research” is the name given here to a methodology that bears the confusion inherent in carrying several names (e.g., action research, participatory action research) for similar types of inquiry with varying emphases. The book briefly documents the theoretical streams that contribute to CBR’s development, emphasizing its principles and guidelines for application. It is easy to overlook how the book’s construction models the theory and method it extols.

In 1987, Paulo Friere and Myles Horton participated in a structured dialogue that aimed at “speaking a book” (Bell, Gaventa, & Peters, 1990, p. viii), *We Make the Road by Walking*. The two pioneers for education for social change shared the philosophy that what we know is a reflection of social experience, arguing for pedagogy’s value as both practical and theoretical in serving social justice. The book’s title reflects the basic premise that, if we hope to advance down the road to a more just, equitable, and sustainable society, we can never know everything before we act. This thinking contrasts familiar conceptions of “academic” as having no practical or useful significance. In traditional models, scholars learn to avoid relevant topics and produce knowledge that will not be acted upon, lest their work be tainted as “applied.” Social change advocates, on the other hand, seek reliable knowledge upon which they can act efficaciously.

Strand and her colleagues pick up the road traversed by a handful of scholarly activists 16 years later in an exceptional collaborative effort based in large part on the formers’ experiences and systematic reflection. During those intervening years, the challenges, rewards, and complaints of the road’s sparse but committed travelers have been increasingly documented when outlets can be found. Recent evidence of growing interest in participatory approaches to learning, and research by a network of international scholars, includes an expanding number of Web sites devoted to the work (e.g., related site links are available through Goshen College at http://www.goshen.edu/soan/soan96p.htm; Cornell’s Participatory Action Research Network at http://www.parnet.org/; and the University of Toledo at http://comm-org.utoledo.edu/research.htm), emergence of discipline-based publications (e.g., Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003), and lively consideration among diverse scholars in winter 2003-2004 through the University of Sussex-sponsored “Learning Participation Dialogue” e-mail list (http://www.ids.ac.uk/ ids/particip/networks/learn-particip/). However, to date CBR remains on the margins of mainstream higher education, both in the U.S. and internationally.

CBR’s status within higher education can be attributed at least in part to what Donald Schon (1995) calls its location within the swampy lowlands:

> In the varied topography of knowledge, there is a high ground overlooking a swamp. On the high ground, manageable problems lend themselves to solution through the use of research-based theory and technique. In the swampy lowlands, problems are messy and confusing...
Community-Based Research and Higher Education is written by faculty specifically for their colleagues who share the same three criteria for academic advancement: teaching, research, and service. The authors ask the reader to set aside the notion that each criterion competes with the others, and instead consider what may be possible by uniting them effectively through CBR. Through experience and systematic reflection on their community work, the authors develop a convincing case for the value of community-based pedagogy and research. Perhaps more importantly, the book indirectly assuages many faculty members’ rarely acknowledged fear of working outside their established expertise. Faculty, used to being “experts” in the controlled classroom environment, can learn how to approach community work through the familiar privacy of the written word.

Despite its many authors, the book melds perspectives, ideology, and language to create a seamless volume rich in examples from diverse geographic, institutional, and community settings. The authors came together under a grant from the Corella and Bertram F. Bonner Foundation and Corporation for National Service. Through combined experience, the authors present a clear and concise review of CBR’s history, principles, and practices, emphasizing understanding and meeting CBR’s inherent challenges. The book takes full advantage of the rich context provided by CBR conducted in a wide variety of institutions spanning public and private schools in urban, suburban, and rural locations and the diverse organizational cultures found in community colleges, top-10 research institutions, an historically Black college, and an Ivy League school.

Some will be disappointed by the book’s scant discussion of theory. However, others have made theory central and the book not only offers a hands-on guide to conducting CBR, but is also the first to comprehensively address strategies for operating within a university setting.

Chapter 1 reviews the origins and principles of CBR, crediting its emergence to three forces:

- widespread criticism of higher education’s disconnection from communities and perspective about the nature and purpose of knowledge;
- growing concern about the professoriate’s exceedingly narrow definition of research; and
- recognition of the need to develop students’ civic capacity and prepare them for active democratic citizenship.

As the book points out, CBR’s historical roots

and incapable of technical solution. The irony of this situation is that the problems of the high ground tend to be relatively unimportant to individuals or to society at large, however great their technical interest may be, while in the swamp lie the problems of greatest human concern. The practitioner is confronted with a choice. Shall he remain on the high ground where he can solve relatively unimportant problems according to his standards of rigor, or shall he descend to the swamp of important problems where he cannot be rigorous, in any way he knows how to describe? (p.28)

Richard Couto (2000) claims Schon overstates the dilemma of swamp scholarship, overlooking a more difficult dilemma. That is, relevance is not enough—swamp scholars have to find new standards for rigor.

Strand et al. have done just that. By redefining rigor within the principles of CBR, the authors present a clear and comprehensive approach to what is possible, and by doing so signal a turning point for CBR methodology. The book’s foreword, by Couto, makes clear the audience for this book: “If you think higher education in the United States should prepare students for active roles of reflective and committed citizenship in a multicultural and interracial democratic society, you will find this book important reading” (p. xiii). The assertion regarding audience is notable because the book, unlike most discussions of CBR to date, does not bother to argue for validity within the dominant paradigm of hypo-deductive scholarship. Instead the book contributes to CBR’s validity, perhaps because the authors recognize that validity can only be constructed among those who share values. This unapologetic assumption of scholarly validity may signal CBR’s conceptual maturation from a fringe practice to a widely used innovation.

Another indication that the book ushers in a maturing phase of CBR is its targeted audience: faculty. The tensions between traditional university research emphases and community needs are generally directed at the academic “system,” which may include both the three main criteria by which a faculty member’s worth is judged and, more specifically, the scientific perspective. This scientific approach emphasizes the value of critical public testing of what is considered knowledge, placing the researcher outside and necessarily separate from the subject of his or her research in a quest for objective knowledge and a separate truth (Reason, 1994, p. 324). However, faculty, not administrators, make the academy’s rules. These are the very same people who shrug off their capacity for doing CBR because their work will not be valued unless it is inaccessible and elitist.
arose separately among several disciplines and across many parts of the world, meaning any discussion of CBR’s influences is bound to omit key contributors. Arguably, the most notable omissions here are Peter Reason, who has utilized and advocated participatory methodologies for more than 20 years, written a chapter on participatory approaches in the widely used *Handbook of Qualitative Methodology* (1994) and coauthored the *Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice* (Reason & Bradbury, 2001), and Columbian participatory research pioneer Orlando Fals-Borda (1969).

Chapter 2 explores the benefits and principles of effective campus-community partnerships, emphasizing the benefits to the community and, more broadly, a democratic society. The statement of principles mirrors that of other participatory research. What sets this discussion apart is the writers’ embodiment of the principles. For example, the principle of shared power among university and community research partners is often framed by academics as a novel moral imperative for the privileged elite. Chapter 2 begins: “...shared power is akin to the notion that all people, even the poor and marginalized, have the right to participate in the decision-making processes that affect their lives” (p. 33). With this introduction to shared power, the book pays homage to an elite audience accustomed to having authority, but quickly moves the reasoning for shared power to a mandate for good research, both in terms of methodology and social justice.

Chapter 3 moves the reading from principles to practice and here too the book distinguishes itself. Based on the authors’ vast experience, the chapter presents strategies for establishing and sustaining effective campus-community partnerships from which to launch CBR projects. The discussion is rich with suggestions and examples based on lessons learned in action, from how to find prospective community partners, to facilitating collaboration and adhering to the demands of long-term goals and outcomes.

Chapter 4 covers methodological principles of CBR. The authors look to what swamp scholars and their community partners have experienced as important, putting them forth here as:

- collaboration, including a thorough and candid discussion of barriers;
- creation and dissemination of knowledge, noting that CBR recognizes and validates sources of knowledge that are often not legitimized within the context of more conventional research approaches; and
- contributions to social change, with a realistic caveat about our limitations as researchers.

The chapter outlines a step-by-step approach to the CBR process, recognizing the iterative nature of the learning process for all involved and need to rethink research techniques based on their contribution to the larger social change agenda.

Chapter 5 delves beneath the “steps” to the guts of the work, stating that the steps provided in the previous chapter alone will not take researchers where they need to go because “as a consequence of taking collaboration seriously, seeking to demystify knowledge creation, valuing community knowledge, and disseminating research for public application and social change, familiar research methods may need to be modified and new methods used” (p. 96). The chapter explores strategies for addressing challenges that may arise at each stage of the research process when faculty and students work “with and for,” as opposed to “on and about,” the community. It also illustrates CBR’s potential to transform all research team members through unanticipated learning.

Chapter 6 develops an exceptional rationale for using CBR as a critical pedagogy, arguing its advantages over the more conventional charity-oriented service-learning, especially in terms of citizenship development. Faculty members who have employed CBR have probably shared in many student benefits as well as hurdles outlined here. Despite the chapter’s analytical strength, it is not likely to change minds—the teaching method will likely be resisted by faculty who only value knowledge as it has been framed for them, as opposed to that gained through experience.

Chapters 7-9 are devoted to the nuts and bolts of faculty work utilizing CBR. Chapter 7 offers a guide for structuring the CBR experience to ensure its viability, pedagogical integrity, and benefits to both students and community. The chapter makes clear the challenges of teaching with this methodology, from predictable conflicts to ethical considerations. Chapter 8 describes the value of locating the CBR organizing structure as a self-governing entity within an academic unit (i.e., as opposed to in public relations or a campus ministry unit). The chapter reviews possible administrative structures, and is outstanding in its attention to the many management issues inherent in CBR work. Chapter 9 offers practical suggestions for how to operate a CBR center within a higher education institution, including important faculty considerations, such as recruitment, development, and sustainability through the university reward structure.

The book closes with an invitation for readers to share in the work of achieving the authors’ vision.
for the future of higher education. In this vision, campus-community partnerships are “prolific, deep, sustained, reciprocal, and actively committed—in myriad ways, in every corner of the United States—to transforming communities and realizing a more just society” (p. 241). Realizing this vision would require higher education to question for whom, and for what purpose, knowledge is created. It would ask faculty to walk outside the paved roads of their classrooms and disciplines, and share authority and status as experts. Community-Based Research and Higher Education makes clear that there is much more to be gained than lost for those willing to act.

References


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