

Learning from the Contradictions: A Critical Reflection on Collaborative Action-Research

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The Context

In the weeks leading up to the URBAN conference, I watched the growing campus protests across the nation. Building on Black Lives Matter and a legacy of organizing, students from schools as varied as the University of Missouri, Yale, and the Claremont Colleges – my place of employment for the past twenty years -- were stepping up, demonstrating, and providing concrete strategies for rooting out institutional racism in our colleges and universities.

Meanwhile, disturbing analyses of the student protests were circling in the mainstream media. As right-wing politicians spewed racist and xenophobic rhetoric, some pundits and academics continued calling for free speech on campuses. Conservative and liberal commentators chastised students as self-interested, coddled, and even self-indulgent youth who could not tolerate disagreement. The *LA Times* had just published an article on micro-aggressions that seemed to connect the student protests simply to individual slights– rather than to a history and system of racism. Such paternalistic and individualizing narratives fuel myths that racism no longer exists, hindering the possibilities for change.

This was the context in which I boarded my plane from Los Angeles to Boston on the morning of November 12. Inspired by student protests against racism and for institutional transformation, I was eager to connect with colleagues across the nation on the topic of the conference -- collaborative action-research for access and equity in education. However, having not been involved with URBAN since its initial inception, I entered the space cautiously as someone new to the collective.

Silences

As college students throughout the nation were vocalizing their concerns and naming the multiple manifestations of racism, it was a little jarring when on the first night of the conference youth voices and structural analyses were sidelined. I had a visceral response while sitting through the presentation on increasing youth employment in a predominately Black and Latinx neighborhood. I was unfamiliar with the politics and work of the organization being presented, making the imagery of who spoke, who listened and what was emphasized disconcerting.

A White organizer took center stage and community members of color in the audience were talked about, talked around, and maybe even homogenized. Briefly, several Black and Latinx youth moved to the front of the room and responded to pre-composed questions. Their voices, perspectives, and concerns seemed to be confined to this narrow space. Thus, phrases such as “having youth at the center” and “representing youth” contradicted what I was observing.

Absent in the presentation was a structural analysis, including the roles of the economy, racism, and gentrification on employment. Faced down, I scribbled my concerns in my notebook. At one point, I asked a question trying to ascertain the role of “the youth” that I kept hearing about.

However, for most of the hour-long presentation, I sat uncomfortably silent with sweaty palms and racing heart.

I scanned the audience for signs of discomfort and disagreement – sighs, rolling eyes, lowered heads. However, since we were seated in a traditional format -- rows facing front listening to a power point presentation, the structure made it difficult to connect with others in the room. This format may have also diminished my own sense of agency – as audience members are expected to listen and only participate by asking questions when allotted time.

At last, when asked to share their reflections on the presentation, two people named some of what I had been feeling. Their calls for “getting to the roots” and critiques of “adultism” rang loudly. These points had been reverberating across the nation-wide campus struggles and helped to frame for me the remainder of our two days together and the work I aim to do. Nevertheless, I interrogated myself for my silence. By not speaking up about the disconnect between what was being presented and what I was observing, my silence could signal agreement, the condoning of frameworks and practices that reinforce power, privilege, and inequality.

Making Connections

The dynamics of the first evening forced me to ask myself and our collective: What do we say? What do we do, and how do we reconcile the disjuncture between the two? If we espouse a commitment to collaborative action-research for access and equity in education, do our actions always illustrate this? If not, are there myths we propagate, even if inadvertently, to camouflage a disjuncture between what we say and what we do, and do those myths work to maintain racism, classism, and other forms of inequality and exclusion. Throughout our conference, there were four overarching and interrelated questions that I considered and that I pose for us now collectively.

First of all, how are we building/fostering community and relationships? Are we working toward strength-based, authentic and non-hierarchical relationships? Or, maybe we are unintentionally working with an assumption of deficiency, adopting a liberal version of the white man’s burden, or seeing communities as something out there, distinct, a “window into the exotica” – a metaphor used by Judith Rollins in her research on White women employers and their relationships with Black domestic workers.

What are our – my -- responsibilities in naming, disrupting, or contributing to the latter when we observe it? Judging by the discussion group that formed during the conference, there is a need for difficult dialogues. I see these as discussions that are not assimilationist, that disrupt the status quo – that challenge respectability politics. Such dialogues are part of the ongoing learning process. As Paulo Freire and Antonio Darder have argued, they allow for the critical reflection and action that are missing in the traditional one-way transfer of information from teacher to students, speaker to audience.

Bernice Johnson Reagon’s 1981 speech on “Coalition Politics” and her distinctions between home and coalition are helpful here. She argues that coalitional work is hard; we may feel shaken to the core. We can’t stay in coalition all the time. It’s not home. Home, on the other hand, is a space where we go to for comfort and warmth.

For me, being part of this collective and working in community with people across differences of power, race, ethnicity, gender, and class is like being in a coalition. We come together because we are committed to community-engaged work, but we approach that work differently. We are from distinct places, possess different forms of privilege, and have varied relationships to and understandings of community.

A second recurring set of questions involved the varying frameworks we are working with/engaging. The call made on the opening night about getting to the roots to understand community concerns is significant. In other words, are we getting radical? Are we considering the significance of racism, sexism, capitalism, and heterosexism and all of their manifestations -- individually, institutionally, ideologically and structurally? Are we thinking intersectionally, linking racism to sexism to classism? To draw on Beverly Daniel Tatum's metaphor of smog in "*Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*" racism is like smog -- as are the other -isms. They're all around us. We may not always see them, but we exist within them. We ingest them and must always be unmasking, unlearning, detoxing, and remaking. If we aren't naming and aiming to dismantle the sources of inequality, how might we be blaming individuals and communities for what are systemic problems?

Part of getting radical includes challenging binaries. As Patricia Hill Collins describes in *Black Feminist Thought*, binary either/or thinking reinforces hierarchies. For those of us who don't fit within the binaries, they are also exclusionary. So, getting deep involves challenging essentializing binaries such as: college-community, race-class, men-women, and Black-White. Contesting such binaries allows us too to make connections -- to see how we may often be both/and rather than either/or.

Getting to the roots also involves considering the roles of ethnic studies in participatory action research. The origins of ethnic studies are about contesting oppressions, working for radical transformations, opening up colleges and universities, working in and with communities, making our work relevant and accessible, and challenging traditional disciplines and knowledge construction. When ethnic studies faculty, frameworks, and legacies are left out of discussions surrounding community engaged work, even if inadvertently, I worry about the possible implications of such silences and invisibility.

Thirdly, the question of how we use language came up several times during our conference. This had to do with accessibility, but I also wonder whose languages are used, who is included in the conversation, who is speaking, and who is forced to listen? Likewise, I think about who has the power to define a population, and how might those definitions be othering. For example, during our meetings, I heard "community" and "youth" used a lot. I wonder how these terms might be a new seemingly polite way of saying "urban" or "at risk." Are such terms used in a short hand or in coded ways that might end up homogenizing and exoticizing?

The most recent spewing of hate-speech by political candidates and media commentators has made explicit that language matters. Language has been used overtly to reproduce and justify inequality. However, when groups who are talked about are not part of the conversation and

when they are excluded from dominant constructions of knowledge, this too can fuel divisions and reproduce hierarchies.

Finally, what are our individual and collective roles in institutional transformation? For those of us working within colleges and universities, how do we make sure that our work is not integrated, tokenized, co-opted, de-politicized by our schools and used to reinforce power and inequality?

Pivotal Moments and Next Steps

Our two days together were short. Just as they left me with lingering questions that I expect to continue posing for myself, there were many pivotal moments that fuel my cautious optimism about the individual and collective work we are engaged in. Among these moments were our small circles when we introduced ourselves at the beginning of the conference. By sharing concrete experiences that have shaped our connection to social justice work or community engaged research, these circles allowed for a holistic connecting of the personal with the political. They encouraged us to open-up, disclose, and share our familial, emotional, and other personal relationships to the work. Similarly, our collaborative poetry making and performing were vital for more fully engaging emotionally with some of the ramifications of racism. Lastly, the calling out of the silences in our larger space about the student protests was a decisive disruption. It captured a sense of urgency and set in motion the very collaborative action encapsulated in the conference's title, enabling us to work together on a solidarity statement.

For me, all three of these moments were foundational in building authentic relationships and fostering asset-based, multi-voiced spaces of sharing, collaborating, and acting. They are crucial for building community, challenging hierarchical models of education, and working to shift the culture of academia. As the recent student protests have made explicitly clear, they are also a step in the larger movement for educational transformation.