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Towards the Recognition and Integration of Action Research and Deliberative Democracy

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Abstract

Because of the shared underlying value systems of action research (AR) and deliberative democracy (DD), the former can be a powerful means for engaging the academy in the latter. AR and DD are both grounded in principles of inclusion, equity, the co-generation of knowledge, and action. In making the case for the integration of AR and DD, we describe their commonalities and place AR in the context of other forms of engaged scholarship. We review outreach scholarship, community-based research and other forms of participatory research, examining each in terms of their alignment with deliberative democratic principles and their potential for furthering deliberative democracy generally. Engaging the academy in research on and for deliberative democracy requires the full recognition of AR and other forms of engaged scholarship. However, Ernest Boyer's call for the academy to recognize the scholarship of engagement as scholarship worthy of tenure and promotion has been heeded unevenly across and within higher education institutions. Yet, embedding action research firmly in the academy is critical to engaging faculty in research that not only furthers our understanding of deliberative democracy, but engages higher education in the work of pushing democracy forward.

Towards the Recognition and Integration of
Action Research and Deliberative Democracy

Deliberative democracy (DD) is an approach to social change that puts citizen deliberation at the heart of policy-making. It involves sustained and intense discussion about critical social issues among a broad range of stakeholders and aims toward new ways of understanding and conceptualizing social issues and creative policy ideas.

Action research (AR) and other forms of engaged scholarship are research methodologies that can be used in many different disciplines to advance deliberative democracy. As an explicitly action-oriented research methodology, AR is built upon deliberative democratic processes and provides a research framework with positive social change as a goal. This paper provides an overview of action research, its connections to deliberative democracy and its overlaps with other forms of engaged scholarship, ending with a call for embedding engaged scholarship in the academy as a recognized and valued form of scholarship. Embedding engaged scholarship in the academy will greatly enhance the engagement of academics in deliberative democratic processes.

What is Action Research?

While there have been a variety of ways of describing and defining AR, there are a few basic elements that are at the core of this methodology. According Greenwood and Levin, "AR is a form of research that generates knowledge claims for the express purpose of taking action to promote social change and social analysis….[It] aims to increase the ability of the involved community or organization members to control their own destinies more effectively and to keep improving their capacity to do so" (p.6). It is based in a process of "democratic inquiry where professional researchers collaborate with participants in the effort to seek and enact solutions to problems of major importance to the local people" (p.75). Stringer adds that as community members "collectively investigate their own situation, [they] build a consensual vision of their lifeworld, …[which] results not only in a collective vision, but also in a sense of community" (p.10). AR does not end, however, with a vision and sense of community; rather, it ends with actions designed and taken to achieve the vision identified. As Greenwood and Levin say, "AR explicitly rejects the separation between thought and action that underlies the pure-applied distinction that has characterized social research for a number of generations" (1998, p.6).

Greenwood and Levin's five principles of action research (1999, p. 75-76) form what we understand to be the foundation of this methodology:

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1. AR is context bound and addresses real-life problems.
2. AR treats the diversity of experience and capacities within the local group as an opportunity for the enrichment of the research-action process.
3. AR is inquiry where participants and researchers cogenerate knowledge through collaborative communicative processes in which all participants' contributions are taken seriously.
4. The meanings constructed in the inquiry lead to social action, or these reflections on action lead to the construction of new meanings.
5. The credibility-validity of AR knowledge is measured according to whether actions that arise from it solve problems (workability) and increase participants' control over their own situation.

Embedded in these five principles is a research design that begins with real-life problems, an understanding of which is arrived at through deliberative democracy processes that then lead to new meanings out of which stem social action. It is a tightly designed research process that relies heavily on methods that lead to a co-generation of knowledge between the researcher and other participants, who in essence become co-researchers. Finally, the success of the research process is measured in terms of the effectiveness of the actions that result from it.

The core set of values underlying AR, according to Stringer (1999, p.9-10), are that it is democratic, enabling the participation of all people; equitable, acknowledging people's equality of worth; liberating, providing freedom from oppressive, debilitating conditions; and life enhancing, enabling the expression of people's full human potential. These four values are very similar to the values of participation, democracy, diversity, inclusion and self-efficacy that underlie deliberative democracy. Indeed, the five principles of AR are almost identical to the five core principles that inform the approach to change used by Everyday Democracy (2010), an organization dedicated to promoting the use of deliberative democracy in social policy-making: involve *everyone*; embrace diversity; share knowledge, resources, power, and decision making; combine dialogue and deliberation; create public talk that builds understanding and explores a range of solutions; and connect deliberative dialogue to social, political, and policy change.

The Action Research Methodology

The AR methodology can include qualitative and/or quantitative data collection techniques as long as participants have agreed to their use, they are good tools for the problem being investigated, and they do not compromise the principles of AR. Grundy and Kemmis identify the minimal requirements for an action research project. First, they emphasize the recursive nature of an AR project as it "proceeds through a spiral of cycles of planning, acting, observing

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and reflecting, with each of these activities being systematically and self-critically implemented and interrelated." Second, they stress the importance of inclusivity in that it must involve "those responsible for the practice in each of the moments of the activity, widening participation in the project gradually to include others affected by the practice and maintaining collaborative control of the process"(Grundy and Kemmis 1981, as cited in Grundy 1988, p.353).

 Designing the AR process begins with the identification of a real-world problem to be solved. This problem may be identified by the researcher or by one or more members of the community or organization affected by the problem. With a problem to be addressed, the next step is to design a research process that adheres to the AR principles and values. Participants need to be carefully chosen to represent a mix of those with the power and resources to implement actions and other stakeholders immediately connected to the problem. Because action research is carried out in real-world circumstances, and involves close and open communication among the people involved, the researchers must pay close attention to ethical considerations in the conduct of their work. Richard Winter (1996, p.13) lists a number of such considerations:

1. Make sure that the relevant persons, committees and authorities have been consulted, and that the principles guiding the work are accepted in advance by all.
2. All participants must be allowed to influence the work, and the wishes of those who do not wish to participate must be respected.
3. The development of the work must remain visible and open to suggestions from others.
4. Permission must be obtained before making observations or examining documents produced for other purposes.
5. Descriptions of others' work and points of view must be negotiated with those concerned before being published.
6. The researcher must accept responsibility for maintaining confidentiality.

Understanding AR and DD in the context of other forms of participatory research

 Many of the aspects of AR discussed thus far are shared by other forms of engaged scholarship, including outreach scholarship, community-based research, participatory research, participatory action research, etc.[1] All of these share, for example, a commitment to involving members of a community external the

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[1] For an excellent discussion of these various forms of participatory research, their historical roots, and their connections to each other, see Tinkler (2004).

academy, a mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in the context of reciprocal and respectful partnership, and the production of knowledge for the public good. In essence, all of these forms of the scholarship of engagement democratize the research process. However, not all of these forms of scholarship are consistent with DD values.

The purpose of this paper is not to define sharp boundaries between these forms of research. This would be an impossible task, given that they have emerged in different disciplines and in different contexts, which has led to often similar methodologies being called by different names. For example, what might be called outreach scholarship in one field would be called community based research in another. That said, there are differences in the kinds of methodologies scholars take when working with members of communities external to the academy, and these differences align with varying degrees of democratization of the research process. This is not to imply, however, that more democratization is necessarily better; rather, it is useful to understand these differences in order to best match the methodology to the research goals, questions, opportunities and constraints.

We suggest that there are three overlapping categories of engaged scholarship:

1. scholarship involving collaboration with a practitioner-expert in the community;
2. scholarship involving practitioner-experts and a broad range of community members as participants in the research design and implementation; and
3. scholarship involving practitioner-experts and a broad range of community members that has action as a stated end-product.

We will refer to these three categories as outreach scholarship, community-based research, and action research. We recognize that there is a risk to using existing language to refer to these three categories. Our intent, however, is to provide a useful way of understanding the various levels at which scholars can and do engage with communities external to the academy and the links between these various levels and deliberative democracy processes.

Central to *outreach scholarship* is collaboration between experts within the university and experts within the community. According to Lerner (2000), "co-learning between these two groups – and humility on the part of both – is needed for such a collaboration to exist. Indeed, the ideas of co-learning and humility have become essential cornerstones of the concept of outreach scholarship" (p.39). Typically, the community experts are practitioners, not community members whose expertise about a given problem stems from their

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lived experience with the problem. An example of outreach scholarship is Cunningham's research project conducted with Randy Wolbert, the clinical director of a local community mental health agency, on the lived experiences of individuals with chronic mental illness. This project was designed in response to a specific question that the clinical director had about why some clients were successful in gaining and maintaining employment while others were not. Cunningham and Wolbert, along with Kalamazoo College student, Mary Beth Brockmeier, collaboratively designed and carried out the research and the results were both published in a clinical psychology journal (Cunningham, Wolbert & Brockmeier 2000) and incorporated into the design of the agency's employment programs. McKinney's research with the director of the local jobs agency on how potential employers and job trainers rated the importance of soft skills is another example of outreach scholarship.

This is an excellent approach when practitioners in the community have a well-framed, concrete question around which a solid research project can be developed. When action results from this kind of scholarship, it tends to come from the practitioner-experts, who are in positions of power such that they can create change in programs and/or policies. Many academicians do this kind of outreach scholarship, but because it is often lumped under the umbrella of community service, it is often not recognized as having scholarly value by either the researcher or the academy more broadly.

Democratization of research occurs in the sense that the expertise and knowledge of practitioners outside of the academy is given scholarly value. However, it does not necessarily include the DD core principals of broad based community involvement and combining dialogue and deliberation in its methodology.

Community based research (CBR), on the other hand, assumes a broader range of community participants who can either represent structured community organizations, informal groups or individual community members. Community-based research "takes place in community settings and involves community members in the design and implementation of research projects. Such activities should demonstrate respect for the contributions of success which are made by community partners as well as respect for the principle of 'doing no harm' to the communities involved" (University of Washington School of Public Health). A key goal of CBR is to validate local knowledge and ensure that this knowledge drives the creation of both policy and programs. An example of this kind of research is Cunningham and McKinney's Convening Our Community project, a major county-wide process designed to engage the citizens of Kalamazoo County in a conversation about how best to move the county toward being a livable, sustainable and economically viable community. We designed processes to collect and share information and create new understandings through countywide

conversations during monthly meetings with key stakeholders and convenings of residents. As a result, assumptions changed, old antagonisms were muted, and a new way of understanding intergovernmental relationships was established. For example, when a countywide transit authority was created and the first millage request went before the voters, a city council person in the suburban city most likely to oppose the millage, said to McKinney, then the mayor of Kalamazoo, the urban core city, "Don't worry; I was part of Convening."

When action results from CBR, it tends to come from deliberative democratic processes through which new sets of shared meanings are produced, local knowledge is validated and lived experience is recognized as a source of expertise. Democratization of research occurs in the sense that the research questions, research design, data analysis, and outcomes are co-generated with community members. In addition, the lived experience and knowledge of group members are recognized as expertise. Empowerment occurs though the deliberative democracy processes that underpin the co-generation of knowledge. Thus, the methodology underpinning CBR is completely consistent with DD core principles.

AR has, on the one hand, elements of both CBR and outreach scholarship in that it requires collaboration with both practitioner-experts and the broader community. As Stringer (1996) points out, AR "is fundamentally a consensual approach to inquiry and works from the assumption that cooperation and consensus making should be the primary orientation of research activity. It seeks to link groups that are potentially in conflict so that they may attain viable, sustainable, and effective solutions to their common problems through dialogue and negotiation" (p. 19). It is, on the other hand, more narrowly focused than either CBR or outreach scholarship as we have described them, because it has action as a clearly defined outcome. In essence, it takes CBR one step further. The production of effective action is a key indicator of successful AR scholarship.

Deliberative democracy assumes that creative social policy emerges from the shared understandings created through collective deliberation. AR builds on this assumption and uses deliberative democracy processes not only to co-generate knowledge but also to create the political will among participants that leads to social action. Because those with the means to actually accomplish the change have been, by design, integral to the AR process, the potential for real action is maximized.

We would argue that, because it has concrete change as its goal, the distinguishing characteristic of a successful AR research design is its grounding in political acumen. The researcher has to understand the political landscape of the community, the organizations involved in the process, and the particular politics surrounding the particular changes toward which the AR project is designed. In order to be successful, the power brokers have to be involved in the research;

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without them, the process could easily lead to a futile clamoring for change. Indeed, if the researcher and the community partners are unable to engage those with the means to enact the change, then AR is probably not the right research design to use. That said, a CBR project might create the political environment in which a subsequent AR project could succeed. Indeed, Cunningham and McKinney's CBR Convening Our Community project led to a subsequent AR project, Convening for Action. This subsequent project engaged several of the power brokers involved in various aspects of land use planning (i.e. elected and appointed planning commissioners in the 24 jurisdictions in the county and the professional planning staffs) in more focused dialogue that led to, for example, increased inter-jurisdictional land use coordination and common GIS land cover mapping in the county.

Because specific action is more integral to the AR methodology than it is to either DD or CBR, there is an increased importance of involving those with the power to enact specific action in an AR project. This creates a productive tension between the AR methodology and realizing the core set of values underlying both AR and DD in that while the deliberation or co-generation of knowledge about the problem and its solutions are democratic, decisions about the particulars surrounding the chosen actions and their implementation are likely to be made by narrower range of participants – i.e. those with the power to make and enact these kinds of decisions.

Embedding engaged scholarship in the academy

John Dewey saw "democracy as an ongoing collective process of social improvement in which all levels of society had to participate" (Greenwood & Levin 1998, p.72), and understood that the role of public education was to prepare everyone for this important work. Democracy itself, to Dewey, was "an ongoing form of social action, a combination of institutional forms and ethical commitment that works toward the increasing ability of all members of society to contribute their intelligence to the whole" (p.73). Over the past 70 years, higher education has wrestled with whether and how to engage in this work, and has most often landed on the side of disengagement, usually glossed in terms of scientific objectivity. As Clark (1980), one of founders of AR, states, "the traditional primary task of the university is the disinterested pursuit of knowledge" (p.151).

Ernest Boyer (1996) has argued that the only way for U.S. colleges and universities to remain "at the vital center of the nation's work" is for them to become "a more vigorous partner in the search for answers to our most pressing social, civic, economic, and moral problems and must reaffirm [their] historic commitment to…the scholarship of engagement" (p.143). Fortunately, there are building blocks already in place for this kind of transformation of the academy.

The rapid growth of service learning on college campuses, for example, provides a building block for institutionalizing and valuing engaged scholarship. While, as Tinkler (2004) points out, service learning provides interesting learning opportunities for students, is not in and of itself engaged scholarship. However, as faculty use service learning as pedagogy in their classrooms, they build relationships with community members that, in turn, can become the collaborative base for their own engaged scholarship. We have seen this happen over and over again on our own campus. (For further information about the role of service learning in fostering community based research, see Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, and Donohue, 2003.)

Many of the more practitioner-oriented fields such as education, nursing, public health, and community development have recognized engaged scholarship for quite some time. Looking at the fields that scholars who contributed to a monograph on crossing the theory/practice divide at universities came from is illustrative. These fields include management, law, counseling psychology, sociology, and education (Sherman & Torbert, 2000). While there are faculty in most other fields who do various forms of engaged scholarship, their scholarship is less likely to be valued.

Even though many faculty members are doing some form of what Boyer would categorize as the scholarship of engagement, it is still true that convincing tenure and promotion committees that this kind of work is legitimate, methodologically rigorous scholarship is an uphill battle, particularly in traditional arts and sciences departments at research-oriented universities. We believe that it is often easier to see the results of outreach scholarship as real scholarship, particularly since that work begins with a more clearly defined research question that can be answered using conventional research methods. As such, it is also more easily publishable. The process of CBR and AR, however, often does not follow the conventional research methodology – i.e. research question, research design, data collection and analysis, and report writing – and the products are often not as well defined. Combined, they are less easily recognizable as scholarship, particularly in the natural and social sciences where good research is often associated with disengagement. AR can be even more highly suspect because of its more explicitly interventionist nature.

Glassick, Huber, and Maeroff's *Scholarship Assessed: Evaluation of the Professoriate* (1997) has been instrumental in helping promotion and tenure committees not only understand the various forms of scholarship articulated by Boyer, including the scholarship of engagement, but how these various forms could be assessed. While resistance to legitimizing the scholarship of engagement continues to exist, and in many institutions even hold sway, there are seeds of change in higher education. Kalamazoo College (2007) recently took up this issue, and after examining promotion and tenure expectations from a variety of

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institutions, devised to following definition and policy for assessing the scholarship of engagement:

> The *scholarship of engagement* involves the generation and/or synthesis of knowledge with the goal of having it put to use by practitioners to address consequential problems. Because the audience of applied scholarship is not necessarily others in one's discipline, but is often practitioners outside of academia, the products of this kind of scholarship are often different from the products of the scholarship of discovery or the scholarship of integration, though the standards and methods of generating the new knowledge tend to be the same…. The indicator of success is usually evidence that the product was used and deemed valuable by the practitioners to which it was aimed…. In addition to work produced explicitly for practitioners, scholars of engagement should present descriptions of this work in broader forums so that the work is exposed to comment and critique by one's professional community. It is also important to note the difference between public service and applied scholarship. While most scholarship of engagement could also be considered public service, most public service is not scholarship of engagement. To be viewed as scholarship, the work must flow directly out of one's (inter)disciplinary expertise and involve the generation of new ways of thinking.

Moreover, increasing numbers of institutions are recognizing that higher education needs to become more directly engaged in solving the many problems facing our communities and are beginning to adjust the institutional meanings associated with scholarship. This shift provides an opening for academics outside the more practice oriented fields to engage in their communities using more action-oriented research methodologies, thereby not only creating new opportunities for deliberative democracy processes, but enhancing those processes as well. AR lends to DD a rigorous research methodology for the co-generation of knowledge through deliberative dialogue. Such work has great potential for not only transforming the academy, but transforming our communities.

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