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Main Article:

Re-Envisioning Research as Social Change: Four Students' Collaborative Journey

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Abstract

This article describes four doctoral students' process of coming together to support each other's work. What emerged was a powerful space of learning and a framework on research for social change. The authors hosted a 2-hour reflection session, which was recorded and transcribed. Text of that session appears in this article along with discussion of (a) key principles of the social change framework, (b) the ways the students came to take ownership over their work and to collaborate, and (c) guidance for other researchers working against the isolation and competition that is too common in the academy.

Keywords: social change; students' reflection; collaboration

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1. Introduction

In September 2005, four doctoral students stood outside the Monroe C. Gutman Library at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, USA, comparing schedules and soaking in the last warmth of a late September afternoon. It was the beginning of a new academic year and with a few semesters under our collective belt, we were eager to dig into our own research, to start focusing our questions, and to hone our research skills. And yet, comparing our prospective schedules, we each felt something was missing from our research preparation. In addition to this gnawing feeling, there was a clear connection in our work; we shared a passion for community building and social justice. Further, we were all playing on the edges of research methodologies, searching for one that resonated with our interests. By the time course registration was over, all four of us had committed to an independent study to explore the role of “qualitative research” in relation to our overlapping research passions. As part of this independent study, each would work independently with a faculty member, planning the syllabus with readings and projects, for which course credits would be received.

We are an eclectic group: among us are an Argentinean-Israeli who is the holder of a new green card--issued to mark permanent residence in the US, one Alaska Native who has lived in Hawaii, one former marketing executive, and an arts educator. Malia came to the table with a rich understanding of and desire to impact how Native American education is conceived of in the US. Terri (Theresa) brought a passion for engaging young people as agents for community change. Shai carried an inspiring vision of peace education playing a role in bringing Israeli and Palestinian youth together. Marit came with a deep belief in the role of art education as a tool for social and racial justice. In weekly conversations, we have drawn from our multiple identities, experiences, and passions to build the foundation of what became a layered learning process.

Since our first conversation as a research group over tea at a local café, we have shared one of the most profound and inspiring educational experiences of our academic careers. We have spent hours in small rooms and over shared dinners every other week, grappling with fundamental questions about the purpose of research, about how we can maintain our integrity in the face of academic constraints, about the merit and wording of our individual research questions, and most importantly, about the ways in which we see research as an important act of social change. By the end of the first semester of meetings we had started formulating our ideas about what we meant by “research for social change.” And by the end of the second semester we realized that we had a responsibility to share what we had learned together. Drawing on a moderated conversation we taped and transcribed, this article offers an overview of our process as a group and our vision of what it takes to do research for social change. For this collaborative piece, we have woven our voices from the taped conversation with our reflections on the definition and practice of research for social change in the hope that our ongoing conversation might encourage other scholars to join with us in re-envisioning what it means to be a researcher.

2. Our Process

What we created was a powerful space of support, creativity, and true collaboration. Initially our discussions centered on drafts of our qualifying papers--the first requirement of our doctoral program before preparing to submit our dissertation proposals. This first step provided each of us with a clear understanding of the others' research topics. Over time, we moved toward open discussion about the themes that run through all our works and, by the end, the conversation moved away from examining our individual work, toward reflecting on our shared research values.

One key to the success of our group was creating a space in which we could exchange our thoughts, challenges, and achievements openly and honestly. We found that by sharing development and ownership of our work with a small group of committed and caring peers an essential new space was created where we as researchers could regenerate when the demands of research threatened to confuse or crush our spirits.

When you are in graduate school you always have your own work in mind. So when you have conversations with others you usually ask yourself "how does this relate to my work?" . . . We committed ourselves to think *with* the person sharing their work. We would say, "Today we're just talking about Marit's work. We are going to take her ideas and work with them as a group as if this was our collaborative project. Next week, we are going to do the same for Shai, and then Malia . . ." It was important to start by putting yourself in each person's shoes.

The work I'm doing here is personal, and it's really hard for me when it's attacked because some people think art is silly, or that humanization is idealistic. So I've developed a little shell that makes it really hard for me to share my work in other spaces . . . it was only within this group that I could put it all out there.

Sharing our work was not only important for strengthening the group's bonds, but it also became an important source of support. We constantly reminded each other to step back from the details of writing an academic paper and reflect on what brought us here in the first place. Many of the questions that we asked were about whether and why something mattered to us personally:

A critical moment for me was when I had all these ideas that were so complicated in my head. I had charts and concept maps that literally filled the table . . . I was at a point of tears. Then Marit said, "I work with kids after school, and the part of your work that focuses on how kids think about community change is the piece that would help me make a difference in their lives." And that's driven everything that's come since.

We each came from a different context, but we realized that the underlying issues we were tackling were not that different. Notions such as empowering youth and showcasing

successful educational practices surfaced when we allowed ourselves to journey outside of our own research worlds and into realms that were unfamiliar to us.

It was really important for me to see how to make this connection about land [and conflicting collective narratives in Shai's work] about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. And I began to think about the conflict up in Alaska, and how it was about people's desire to use the same lands in different ways, and saying, "We are talking about the same thing." You do need to become knowledgeable about your particular field, but there is powerful learning that can happen when you look across the field, when you look through these boundaries.

Finally, through our conversations, we recognized a common theme at the core of all of our work that impacted our experience in academia: our shared passion for using research to affect social change. Regardless of the context or the process, we all shared an unwavering drive to bring about change in our communities through the power of research. This realization led us to further explorations about what research for social change meant and how to define our own role as researchers in this context. At the end of this journey, we developed a set of principles to help shape and define our own work.

3. Research for Social Change

Through our discussions together, we came to see that the purpose of research for social change is to work collaboratively within and across communities in order to transform social and political systems. It is fundamentally different from other types of research in its commitment to collaborative reflection, dialogue, and action. It requires understanding the goals, interests, and values of all those involved. It requires moving beyond documenting problems to learning together what it takes to reach shared ends. It requires constant dialogue with all partners to co-construct research questions, methods, and interpretations of data. It requires ongoing reflection to make sure the work is aligned with common values and, ultimately, informs action. Rather than experts, we often think of ourselves as learners in this process with other learners.

I think what really brings us together is that we know that . . . there's gonna [i.e., going to] have to be some serious social change in order to bring about the ideas that we all have. In order for there to be peace in the Middle East, something's got to change. In order for young people in our country to . . . feel like they . . . have some agency, something's got to change. For Native American people in our country who have been denied of any rights, and particularly in education, something has got to change. And I think for us that's where the social change piece comes in. . . . We have a specific goal, and we're going to make it happen. . . . [My] master's year, I wrote my final piece for a class on youth as their own ethnographers. And . . . I started . . . questioning the split between the researcher and the research-ed, the subject and the object, and just thinking about why those distinctions are there and how they so often mimic colonization and oppression . . . If I'm really going

to be involved in research it has to be in a way that makes as dedicated an effort as I can to alter those dynamics of power in research.

For me the word that is most strong [in defining research for social change] is dialogue, that it is . . . an iterative experience . . . I just really don't believe that . . . the collection of data, the processing of data, the building of theory . . . is something that can responsibly and effectively be done alone . . . There's a pushing or a rejection of the notion of expert . . .

In addition to bringing a specific set of skills into this collaborative process, our role as academics and researchers can provide access to important sociopolitical networks. Our commitment to reflection and dialogue includes using our research to support the kind of dialogue across sectors that can generate the social, political, and economic capital we need to impact social change.

4. Researcher's Role and Responsibility

For us, research is very personal work with a public element. The questions we ask, the ways we collect and analyze data, and how we represent conclusions reflect our understandings of ourselves as researchers and as members of communities. Our early discussions centered on how to balance our relationships with those we work with and with the academy. Working together is essential in both being able to manage these many connections, and also in challenging us to actively pursue these connections as research is too often an isolating experience. Time and time again, our conversation brought us back to the notion of *reciprocity* in order to foster collaboration and make our research meaningful and actionable.

I think reciprocity [is] really ensuring that when we go to ask you to sit with us for an hour, to share your experience, to let us into your homes, to let us into your communities, to embrace us as a part of your communities, that there is something that's gained as well--that there is, again, a shared process. So, whenever we're developing protocols, whenever we're thinking about our design, where's the reciprocity piece in this? Not so much "What are people getting?" but "Where's that sharing happening," such that it is a true dialogue; it is a true exchange of ideas.

[I]t's not about coming back at the end, it's about every step of the way, it's working with practitioners and saying, "Here's this" and "What do you think?" So there's this dialogue through the whole thing that means that by the end we've learned something together; it's not just presenting what we learned.

We also realized that if reflection and dialogue are two key goals of research for social change, researchers have a responsibility to engage in reflection and dialogue with our peers--both researchers and practitioners. Through this peer interaction, we find both support and accountability for developing research that makes a positive contribution to a

community. This is a key aspect of our doctoral experience that we hope other students engage in and receive support from their university program administrators in developing. Once we came closer to finding a balance in our relationships, we were able to truly appreciate the role of our university training and the opportunity it provides to leverage resources and knowledge in support of social change. At this point, we shifted from calling ourselves “border crossers” to describing ourselves as “facilitators.” This was an important shift because we no longer saw ourselves at the center of the process. Instead, the questions and research needs of the people and communities we work with were at the center.

I think there’s a role of a researcher . . . this role of, not necessarily being in the center. But being some sort of a conduit that is about being able to somehow play a role of taking lots of kinds of knowledge . . . and figur[ing] out how to very honestly bring those things together so that people playing different roles in moving something forward can truly hear. And take in something that somebody else knows and figure out what it means in terms of what they want to do next . . . which is different from a synthesizer role, which is “I’m [going to] take in everybody’s ideas and *I’m* going to say what the real deal is. I’m going to say how that all fits together.”

[B]y taking on [the] role [of researcher for social change], you’re saying to yourself, “I’m assuming that responsibility of making that change that I want to see,” but at the same time understanding that you’re not making the change for yourself, that this is in collaboration with others. And so it’s about, almost [a] conversation in a community or in a given setting of what that change, what change needs to take place. Making sure that goals are the same, making sure that the vision, that there’s a common vision, and then helping facilitate that process.

So, the primary role of researchers for social change is to facilitate the development of dialogue, articulation of shared values, and action for change. It is not a one-way delivery of knowledge and service. This can be a very exhausting and draining space to occupy. And thus, the role of critical peers is essential in enacting this responsibility in research and in making this work public.

5. Conclusion

It has been some time since the four of us stood by the library, planners in hand, to schedule the first of many meetings. At the time, we had no idea how powerful the process of learning together would be, nor how deeply it would impact our individual research projects and our collective understanding of what it means to be a researcher dedicated to social change. In collaborating to write this article, we were motivated by a drive to share our process and the lessons learned with other emerging researchers. And so, in closing, we offer three suggestions for those embarking on research for social change:

Re-envisioning research as collaborative: Research for social change requires shifting conventional modes and roles of research; it necessitates the involvement of the various communities intersecting in our work--from those we study to those who hold us accountable to our purpose. In re-envisioning research as collaborative, we must shift our notion that the individual is at the center to realize that just as it “takes a village to raise a child,” it takes a committed group of people working in collaboration to earn a degree, impact a community, or change a society.

Staying connected to the purpose: A researcher engaged in social change work must remain deeply connected to her purposes, refusing to lose sight of the larger picture and meaningful usability of her work. To stay connected to our personal and community purposes, we must make connections with people with whom we can regenerate when the demands of research threaten to confuse or crush our spirit or clarity of purpose. Through constant self-reflection and ongoing dialogue, we ensure that our hearts remain in our work.

Making it public: As researchers for social change, we have a responsibility to share our reflections, our challenges, and our commitments to this work. It also means that we must be willing to open up our research process and ourselves--to be vulnerable with our peers and our research partners, and to make this struggle public. It is only in sharing the process that we can effectively impact not only the communities our work touches, but also the academic understanding of what research for social change can be.

As we have each begun to write our qualifying papers, we have returned again and again to these lessons learned. In continued conversations we have found a sense of hope in the challenges of attempting to conduct research for social change--a sense of hope rooted in the collaborative learning process we have shared with each other. We offer our experience to others--both in academia and beyond--as an alternative way to consider the research process and its impact on society. This vision of research for social change has instilled us with tremendous strength and motivation to continue our work, despite the inevitable bumps and frustrations. It is a vision that we invite you to consider, critique, or continue to explore, and in the spirit of the work, to share your conclusions.

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