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Fusing Horizons Through Conversation: A Grassroots Think-Tank Approach to Applied Research

Abstract

This article summarizes the authors’ experiences working in a rapidly growing Latino immigrant community in California. Applying a theoretical framework developed by the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, the article deals primarily with the fusion of horizons of people at the grassroots and people mostly connected with the academic world. At its core is a discussion of the importance of conversation, place, story, and association in developing new community-based pathways for conducting applied research.

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Human thought is consummately social: social in its origins, social in its functions, social in its forms, and social in its applications. At base, thinking is a public activity – its natural habitat is the houseyard, the market place, and the town square.


Introduction

It goes without saying that as applied researchers we must meet a plethora of challenges if our work is to be successful. One of the most difficult of these challenges is the facilitation and maintenance of indepth conversations between persons from the grassroots and persons in the professions. Without these conversations, it is impossible to develop the kinds of close relationships that are necessary for the conduct of effective community-based research and action. Sociologist Randy Stoecker (2005, 34) notes that applied researchers are increasingly seen as “... exploiting poor communities or disrupting organizations for their own professional advancements.” As a result, Stoecker says, “... Some community organizations now even require outside researchers to sign a contract stating what they will give to the community.”

This mistrust is not only due to past misdeeds of applied researchers working in poor communities but to very real differences in horizons between those anchored mostly at the grassroots and those anchored in the professions. These persons from the grassroots are individuals whose horizons tend to be delineated by local space and whose orientations are toward proximate horizons. Postmodern theorist James N. Rosenau (2003, 87) describes such persons in the following words: “They may well be aware of remote events and places that can have consequences for them ... but they nonetheless interpret distant proximities through local lenses, as readily absorbable into their longstanding practices and worlds.”

Many people who inhabit the grassroots, particularly immigrants, place an emphasis on “cultural intimacy.” Svetlana Boym (2001, 255) argues that in immigrant communities people tend to reconstitute a mini
nation state on foreign soil out of longing for their homeland. This, in itself, creates urgent demands for intimate communitywide relations that more likely than not are expected to include in-depth conversations of a communal nature. Conversely, professionals working at universities, community agencies, or government tend to share characteristics that derive from our readiness to move personally and electronically across a variety of worlds at a moment’s notice. We are oriented mostly toward horizons that are often far removed from where we are physically located. We tend to be oblivious to events occurring in our neighborhoods or in the communities that surround the universities or agencies where we work or study. Not surprisingly we often become impatient with long conversations, particularly those occurring outside the professional and familial realms. In the words of a colleague: “... All this emphasis on talking to people outside of our discipline and in the community is a distraction from our obligations, which are principally to publish and teach...” (Bernheimer and Arguelles in press)

Facilitating and maintaining open and in-depth conversations between persons with different horizons is not an easy task; yet it is an essential stage in community-based applied research practice. The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960, 1975) has argued that the creative renewal of conversation as an art form is critical to the fusing of horizons between persons. Fusing horizons rather than trying to change the horizons of those we disagree with, Gadamer insists, is the only way that understanding can take place and that persons from different backgrounds can come to terms with the other’s difference and uniqueness. When the horizons of grassroots people and professionals are fused, a common living language emerges. This language, in turn, facilitates a never-ending process of open and deep conversations, and an ongoing fusion of horizons. Thus, like many other researchers and scholars, including Baker, Jensen, and Kolb (2002), we believe that these conversations and fusion of horizons are critical for effective community-based applied research practice.

This article is the story of the Ontario Grassroots Think-Tank and of a rapidly growing and largely Latino immigrant community in a section of the city of Ontario in Southern California. Here, the think-tank facilitates the identification of community needs and assets and mobilizes people to meet those needs by engaging in a variety of civic innovation, research, and outreach efforts.

During its 3 years of operation, the think-tank, formerly called the Ontario Community University Partnership (or simply the Partnership) by its community members, has brought a coordinated and community-based applied research agenda to the Claremont Colleges. In the view of many faculty, staff, and students, the Think-Tank has made possible many more transdisciplinary community research projects than would have been developed without it. During the period of its Community Outreach Partnership Centers (COPC) grant from the Office of University Partnerships at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the think-tank implemented more than 14 different applied research projects in 6 different academic departments, and provided service-learning and research opportunities to more than 100 Claremont undergraduate and graduate students. The think-tank identified, celebrated, and mobilized the capacities of its members and, as a result, has been remarkably efficient in achieving the goals outlined in the COPC grant. These goals revolved around identifying and addressing community needs in one of the most economically depressed and socially disenfranchised sections of the city of Ontario. The think-tank was able to complete the grant’s research and outreach objectives ahead of schedule and generated new projects that were not included in the original grant proposal.

Think-Tank Origins

The life of the Ontario Grassroots Think-Tank began in the spring of 2001 with a series of conversations between members of community groups and social agencies, and faculty, students, and staff from the Claremont Colleges. These
conversations were organized and facilitated mostly by Marie Sandy, one of the authors, who at the time was a doctoral student at the Graduate University and was directing a college service-learning project in Ontario. A 2002 COPC grant awarded to Claremont Graduate University and Pitzer College, eventually supported the think-tank. Both institutions are part of the Claremont Colleges and are located near Ontario.

The think-tank currently has more than 40 members, all recruited through a snowball fashion. Most of the members are working-class Latino residents of Ontario, while a handful are representatives from a variety of local professional agencies and government departments. Faculty, staff, and students from the Claremont Colleges have participated as members of the think-tank in all stages of its lifespan.

The Foundations and Structure of the Think-Tank

The think-tank is both a foundational process and a field through which the fused horizons of its members find expression. Past and present members of the think-tank have come to believe that conversation is the soul of the think-tank. Through these conversations members came to recognize the important role that deliberation and research could play in helping them manage the affairs of their community. In addition, these conversations allowed think-tank members to understand and appreciate the role that universities can play in clarifying the nature of community problems, mobilizing resources, and fostering civic innovation. Hence, it may be insinuated that these conversations offer hope for bridging the gap between scientific research and the totality of human life. (Gadamer 1966, 1976.)

Think-tank founders believed that conversation must come first in designing research and outreach projects, and the think-tank provided many opportunities for all involved to cultivate different skills of conversation. One such skill involved sincerely questioning a matter at-hand without setting out to out-wit, out-argue, or divine the intentions of one another. One faculty member described this approach as having its closest analogue in the Socratic docta ignorantia (learned ignorance), whereby one learns that “one does not know” and assumes a state of readiness for understanding. Current members of the think-tank believe that their work is and must continue to be grounded in a natural four-fold complex of tools, practices, and inner reflections. These are: place, stories, action-reflections, and association. Use of these tools, which are described below, represents an alternative conception of community-based applied research.

The Place Foundation

In the literature on contemporary civic innovation and renewal, scholars such as Harkavy (2002) and McCoy and Scully (2002) have underscored the fact that civic engagement that is informed by community-based inquiry can only occur in the kind of physical spaces that are missing and in urgent demand in universities. Other scholars such as Mallory and Thomas (2003, 11) strongly advocate for colleges and universities to provide “intentionally designed, permanent spaces on campus for identifying, studying, deliberating, and planning action regarding pressing issues with ethical or social implication.”

In the mid-1990s, Pitzer College Dean of Faculty Alan Jones, then a professor of psychology, and Lourdes Arguelles, one of the authors, were living in the city of Ontario. Feeling the need to further root their teaching and research practices in a community space, and to encourage others to do the same, Jones negotiated on behalf of Pitzer College to purchase a house owned by the city. The Pitt House rapidly became known as a center for a variety of service-learning and other community-related activities (Sandy and Arguelles 2004) and the obvious choice for a meeting place for the Partnership.

The Story Foundation

The foundation of the think-tank rests upon stories that describe the life and experiences of all its members. This storied foundation ensures that others clearly hear the guiding thoughts, explanations, doubts, and dreams of those who are often ignored in traditional community projects due to their low social rank or
lack of institutional affiliation. One student who observed the think-tank in action described it this way: "The emphasis on storytelling facilitated the flow of conversation. In listening, I became convinced that true participation of community folks in projects involving the university is best achieved when there is an emphasis in storytelling. It seems to me that this is the preferred mode of communication at the grassroots."

**The Research-Action Foundation**

**Getting started.** Author Marie Sandy began to hold freewheeling conversations with a handful of university faculty and students, as well as with residents and the staff of local agencies, about how the university and community might work together as partners. The group shared stories, which included an incredible amount of gossip and jokes, and slowly began to envision how they could work together to address common problems using both community and university expertise. By telling stories in this way, the group gave shape to what ordinarily remains “chaotic, obscure, and mute” in conversations, lying outside the focus of getting things done (Polkinghorne 1988, 134). Through word of mouth, more and more people joined in these conversations. At each meeting, the group always asked: “Who is not here?” The conversation group wanted more participants who represented community-based and faith-based organizations, neighborhood schools, and other local institutions. The group also sought participants who reflected the racial, ethnic, and class diversity of the city in general and its socioeconomically depressed sections in particular. Membership in the group, which now saw itself as a formal community-university partnership, was open. Initially, people were welcomed to join at any time. As the group grew larger, however, new members were asked to participate in an orientation session.

**Designing community inquiry.** As its ranks swelled and its sessions became more focused, the conversation group began to see itself as a grassroots think-tank whose task was to engage in research-action to address the most pressing community problems. The grassroots members were learning anew what popular educator Madhu Suri Prakash and economist Gustavo Esteve (1998, 72) have described as: “...to walk in their own feet; to trust again their own noses rather than some institutional authority. They were fully asserting the powers of the weak…” For their part, university members were discovering paths to sharing their expertise in ways that were not demeaning. They were rooting themselves in the think-tank by taking creative new steps to escape some of the narrow certainties of academic time and production. The much-anticipated fusion of horizons had begun to take place.

This fusion of horizons was exemplified in the production, distribution, and analysis of a community survey that would help the think-tank identify and prioritize community needs. In a truly participatory fashion, the group designed a bilingual (English/Spanish) survey to determine and rank community needs in a section of the city that think-tank members thought needed urgent attention. The survey included sections with Likert-scale and dichotomous questions as well as a few open-ended questions. Partnership members distributed the survey at a Cinco de Mayo festival held at a city park. One grassroots partner came up with the idea to hold a raffle for a scooter to encourage people to complete the survey, and university members promptly developed a mechanism to ensure the anonymity of respondents involved in the raffle. This approach worked remarkably well, and the group collected more than 560 surveys. This survey, which is included in the appendix, may be replicated without the express permission of the authors.

After the surveys were collected, two graduate education students tabulated the survey data, and another former student, Dr. Delacy Ganley, conducted an initial analysis of the quantitative data. Several undergraduate students, who were enrolled in a qualitative research methods class, analyzed the answers to the open-ended questions. The think-tank then met to make sense of the student reports. This was a highly contested and sometimes emotionally charged meeting. Members representing community agencies that provide free and low-cost immunizations to poor Ontario residents were
dismayed that residents did not rank immunization as a high priority. Think-tank members representing a local community college were upset that higher education was one of the residents' lowest priorities, although English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, computer training, and job training ranked higher. The group asked questions about the validity as well as the meaning of these results. Did access to free immunization rank low because this access was already being provided or because it was not needed or valued? If higher education was not currently a high priority, should the think-tank start a campaign to promote it, or should the group work to provide the type of education residents indicated that they wanted?

Analyzing data to structure think-tank activities. By group consensus, the think-tank decided to honor and begin addressing the priorities identified in the community survey while vowing to conduct further research to explore these and other priorities. From the top seven community priorities identified in the survey, the think-tank selected three areas on which to focus. The group reached its decision by majority vote. The three areas selected, which then became the basis of the COPC grant, were health, housing, and education. Each think-tank member chose one priority area in which to work for at least 1 year, and then joined that subcommittee. The think-tank did not choose to address other critical areas identified by community members, including access to affordable childcare, transportation, and safety. Many group members felt that they did not have the expertise or resources to devote to these issues. Some noted that a substantial amount of Community Development Block Grant money was already being devoted to safety issues and that the police department, among others, could make the greatest impact in this area. The think-tank made survey results available to various city departments; these departments may address other issues in the future.

Informed by conversations on the survey data, the subcommittees began refining their topic areas and outlining needed research and outreach activities. Each subcommittee linked its discussions to the priorities identified through the survey, which became the basis for each subcommittee's activities. For example, the healthcare subcommittee did not include immunization and dental care in its research and outreach agenda since those areas received relatively low scores. Following the priorities of survey participants, the subcommittee gave higher priority to strategies that would improve access to affordable healthcare and health information, and developed a bilingual healthcare resource directory and a *promotoras de salud* project that emphasized heart health. The education subcommittee focused on job skills training and access to employers rather than on greater access to higher education because community members did not identify the latter as their highest priority.

Undergraduate and graduate students, as well as some faculty members, were recruited by the think-tank's university members and assigned to the subcommittees. Community partners served as the primary authors on some research projects, including the bilingual resource directory and the bilingual *Thrift}* Living Guide. Students implemented other projects with faculty support. The think-tank paid these students, some of whom also received academic credit for their work. Examples of the research-action projects completed by the students included a meta-analysis of community health needs assessments conducted by area hospitals, a housing research project that identified leverage points for first-time homebuyers and incentives for mortgage lenders, and a project to identify appropriate education program activities for homeless families.

The Associational Foundation

The associational nature of the think-tank has greatly facilitated its research-actions. Associations, we are reminded by community theorists and organizers Jodi Kretzmann and John McKnight (1993), are usually place-based and typically ad hoc. They are the foundation of a democratic society and differ from institutions in that they do not possess a strict hierarchical structure. Think-Tank research and outreach activities have been organizationally nonhierarchical and decentralized in implementation.
and have benefited from the perspectives and resources of participants, who represented many different groups, interests, and life experiences and worked in volunteer, temporary, and non-hierarchical capacities. Given the vicissitudes of fortune of small nonprofits and the geographic mobility of faculty and residents, this structure has ensured stability for the group over time because the activities were never dependent on any one organization or individual. This associational foundation was complemented by a centralized communication network and the provision of status-related benefits, which provided the necessary infrastructure to sustain research-action activities. The think-tank gave its members the use of a meeting place, a central phone number, a listserv, a Web site, and business cards that lent status and legitimacy to those individuals who had no institutional affiliation. On this matter, one grassroots member commented: "The university opens doors for me that have always been closed."

The associational feel of think-tank operations reflects what anthropologist Frederique Apffel-Marglin (1998) has described as a collective-action way of making knowledge where "... emotional bonding with particular others is what generates new insights and new knowledge. Knowledge here is not separated from emotion." The emotional bonding that has taken place within the think-tank has helped to break biases and enlarge perspectives. The following conversation about the think-tank's bilingual resource directory illustrates this process:

Partner 1: What I liked about the directory is that [another community partner] and I butted heads so nicely. [Laugh] It was the funniest thing. I came from one perspective. And she came from a totally different perspective.

Partner 2: It was like a nightmare, but it was a good nightmare. There were a lot of battles, but you know, it came out nice. When you just have one group of people doing something and they all come from the same background, you are not going to get a good thing. It might be good for the people who did it, but you're not going to get a well-rounded version of what is going to help the majority.

Lessons Learned
For the authors, participation in the think-tank resembled touching any part along the circumference of a wheel and finding a direct line leading to the axis. For us, that access was the experience of the grassroots. Experiencing the grassroots meant learning many new lessons and relearning some of the ones that we had forgotten as we abandoned our own communities—a white working-class community and an immigrant community—for the horizons of the university. These lessons included:

Breaking Bread
The members of our think-tank relearned the importance of breaking bread together as a regular part of our work. In particular, we put food first during our meetings. In the following words of our grassroots partners:

Partner 1: When you were getting your food and sitting down, it gave everybody a chance to get to know one another. Then we got down to business.

Partner 2: That one [facilitator] made us sit there in the living room with all of the papers, and no one can leave until we finish, but we knew there was food out in the kitchen and it was late, and do you know what people are thinking when they are sitting there when they know there is food coming? They are wondering what is happening to the food? Is it getting cold?

Validating Participation
During think-tank meetings, we usually used flipchart paper to keep visual notes, which were helpful when transcribing minutes. Most importantly, the notes helped grassroots members feel they were being heard during meetings. In the words of one grassroots partner:

Partner 1: It is very important to write on the board because that validated what
people said. It gave a visual that everyone could see, and everyone else could remember what was being said. In our meetings when we wrote it, that meant they heard it, they can see it, in some cases, they could feel it because they could see it in the person's emphasis.

**Journeying from the Concrete to the Abstract**

Our think-tank meetings became true journeys from the concrete to the abstract. We typically began our meetings with refreshments or dinner, giving people an opportunity to talk together until a critical mass of people was ready to begin. We then held introductions and introduced discussion of a specific concrete project, such as voting on the partnership’s logo. Everyone present could participate in the discussion, whether or not they had been involved before. We then proceeded to review the activities of each of the subcommittees with community representatives from each subcommittee taking center stage and the entire group offering suggestions and assistance. We continued the meeting by tackling the conceptualization of new activities such as the design of future publications or a discussion of strategic planning or advocacy issues. Finally, we ended our meetings with announcements of upcoming events.

**Hanging-in There Through Earthquakes and Hurricanes**

We relearned, or remembered, that conflicts and misunderstandings are inevitable and need to be anticipated, but not in a way that they become a self-fulfilling prophecy. We began to equate these conflicts and misunderstandings with natural events like earthquakes and hurricanes. We also began to share with each other the tools of practical wisdom that had helped us cope with these events in our personal and work lives. Gerald Bruns (2002, 47) suggests that these “talents” of practical wisdom include “responsiveness, flexibility, improvisation, readiness for revision and the imagination (in detail) of infinite possible worlds ....”

The most serious earthquakes and hurricanes we experienced occurred after we were awarded the COPC grant, and it became known around the city that our group’s conversations now involved real money and increased university resources. Suddenly more high-level institutional agency representatives began to attend the meetings regularly. Most of these people were white and wore expensive business attire, whereas the majority of our original conversational group had been people of color, most of whom were casually dressed. Other earthquakes and hurricanes also occurred after the group received its COPC funds. University partners hired a project director without consulting the grassroots members of the think-tank. They chose a very competent graduate student who, while a woman of color, was not a Latina and did not speak Spanish. For many partnership members, this was an insult. Grassroots members promptly voiced their concerns that the group was being controlled by elite whites.

The sharing of practical tools of wisdom and the group’s well-honed conversational skills eventually paid off. We were able to discuss this issue in considerable depth at a rather volatile think-tank meeting. The discussion led to an agreement to radically modify the partnership budget and hire a Latino bilingual coordinator for the think-tank. We also agreed to hold ongoing discussions about the dynamics of race, ethnicity, class, and gender in our work together. As Native American organizational theorist Kay Lynn Two Trees (1998) once advised author Marie Sandy, “you need to hang in there” when doing cross-cultural and community work.

**Conclusion**

The notion of university-created spaces for association and conversation is an idea whose time may finally have come. In our work with the think-tank, we have found that these spaces are fundamental to the fusing of horizons between people at the grassroots and in the professions, and that this fusion facilitates and improves the conduct of community-based applied research and outreach.
Harkavy (2004), Mallory and Thomas (2003), McCoy and Scully (2002), and Schneider (1999) continue to underscore the necessity for universities to make commitments of tangible physical and financial resources for the creation of spaces through which a variety of people—representing the grassroots, local governments and agencies, and the university—can implement socially responsible research and community outreach activities while learning or relearning the skills of conversation and association required for the survival and expansion of our democracy.

Finally we must say that the Ontario Grassroots Think-Tank is an experiment with an uncertain end. Whether it will continue to turn out well in the face of economic, social, and cultural constraints and the everyday personal pressures on its members, is unknown. In the meantime we hope that the lessons learned within the think-tank will help community-based applied researchers in their search for new pathways for conducting their work. In addition, we hope that telling the think-tank story will contribute in a positive manner to the development of a more critical and comprehensive vision for university-community partnerships.

Authors

Marie Sandy, Ph.D., is a community research associate at Claremont Graduate University (CGU) and a consultant to university-community partnerships. Dr. Sandy was co-principal investigator of the CGU/Pitzer Community-University Partnership and the founder of the Ontario Grassroots Think-Tank.

Lourdes Arguelles, Ph.D., is professor of education and cultural studies at the Claremont Graduate University (CGU). Dr. Arguelles was principal investigator of the CGU/Pitzer Community-University Partnership and is currently co-principal investigator of the Test Edge National Demonstration Project, a congressionally funded research and intervention program designed to teach emotional intelligence skills in classrooms across the nation. Dr. Arguelles’ work has been published in academic and popular journals around the world.

References


Two Trees, Kay Lynn. 1998. Personal communication.

Additional Reading


Appendix

Community Needs Survey—Sponsored by an Alliance of Ontario Community and University Groups (See attached PDF File)