

# Participatory Action Research

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[Maria Hicks](#) | [Jason Miller](#)

### Maria Hicks, Graduate Student, Anthropology Department

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their/our inquiry without imposition of your  
will  
Can you intervene in the most vital matters and  
yield to events taking their course  
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Can you intervene in the most vital matters and yield to events taking their course  
Can you attain deep knowing and know you do not understand  
Conceive, give birth and nourish without retaining ownership  
Trust action without knowing outcome  
Guide by being guided  
Exercise stewardship without control...

--Interpretation of words attributed to  
Lao Tzu, c. 550 BC  
from Yoland Wadsworth  
in the *Handbook of Action Research*, p. 430

Traditional modern knowledge creation and sharing processes are often hierarchical and exclusive. In general, we learn and teach from a perspective that students are receivers of knowledge while teachers give knowledge. PAR, on the other hand, encourages us to value different kinds of knowledge and for all of us to engage in the role of learner as well as educator. We (the student teachers, the professor, the students enrolled in the class) all gained from the life, teaching, and inquiry experiences that each individual brought to the classroom. In this way, our collaboration in teaching this course modeled the principles behind PAR. We all created a PAR experience in the classroom at the same time that we engaged students in PAR projects within the community.

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Joyce's years of experience  
teaching and researching."***

In this way, we were engaging in PAR research within the university. Really, how can one teach that community members have valuable knowledge and the skills to practice inquiry on their own if students are not given the same role within the classroom? Working together as a team, Jason and I benefited from Joyce's years of experience teaching and researching as well as from her credentials. I think Joyce benefited from our naiveté, which often translates into enthusiasm, as well as from our experience and research with PAR. The three of us

benefited from the varied experiences applying the methodology that the students brought to each class period as well as from the life experiences of many of the students (some of whom were non-traditional students). We all benefited from the resources, work, and experience of the community.

Having experienced the *Fieldwork Methods* class as students of Joyce, Jason and I were close to the challenges the students would face. Also being graduate students beginning our own fieldwork, we were in the thick of what the students would face as they set out to work with the community through the PAR class.

With the immediacy of our connections to the individuals who would be taking the class as well as our familiarity with Joyce's teaching methods, I like to think that our participation in the planning stages enhanced the course. I can recall sitting down over tea at a local coffee house with Joyce and literally mapping out the entire quarter in draft. This also gave me the opportunity to see what goes into the job of being a professor first-hand. It has been my experience that there are very few opportunities for students to get this kind of look into the life of an academic. I consider this to be a career-enhancing aspect of our

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collaboration. I came out of this with the feeling that my mentor was also now a colleague.

***"I was extremely excited about this opportunity and I felt a sense of obligation to and ownership of the class after having helped in the planning."***

This participation in the planning stages of the class carried over into the delivery of the course. As we learned more about PAR and the way individuals are asked to work together in a new dynamic model that allows all to have voices and expertise, Joyce decided she wanted Jason and I to co-teach the class. I was extremely excited about this opportunity and I felt a sense of obligation to and ownership of the class after having helped in the planning. As a teaching assistant I have taught a lecture written by someone else before. I found teaching a class that I had co-designed was more natural and allowed me to develop more of my own style.

Having extensively researched the topic, I was more comfortable with speaking in the class. I am also accustomed to having specific times when I can participate. In this class I could jump in whenever I had something to add. This was true for the students enrolled in the course too. I have taught a class as university staff before and struggled with "control" and "establishing authority," especially given that I am female and appear younger than I am. I think having Joyce in the classroom not only enabled the university to allow me to teach an upper division class, but also gave the students confidence that they were getting a quality educational experience. The open atmosphere and nature of the subject matter also diminished the need for "authority." Everyone became an expert as each experience was unique and we all learned from each other.

Honestly, I could write an entire paper on the benefits of this class. I will be able to use this experience in many different ways. I have gained what anthropologists refer to as "social capital" from this experience. I have already presented at a national conference where I highlighted my participation in the class; I will be able to reference this website and award on my CV; and, I have been asked to return to Peru as an intern for the entire summer with room and board provided to me. I have gained confidence in my abilities to teach, in my knowledge of the subject matter, and I have affirmed my love of the methodology.

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## **Jason Miller, Graduate Student, Anthropology Department**

### ***Par Is a Tree, a River, and a Mountain Path***

PAR is like a tree, deeply rooted in people's realities,  
grounded to the earth and, at the same time,  
stretching upwards to the sky.

PAR flows like a river; open-ended, finding its way.  
Sometimes deep and calm; at other points,  
shallow and turbulent.  
Complete with cascading waterfalls,  
seemingly stagnant swamps and converging deltas.

Those creating knowledge and change through PAR  
climb up mountains.  
Following a small path of investigation and discovery,  
we will circle the mountain many times,  
with each turn finding a broader, more enriched view.

from Susan E. Smith, *Nurtured by Knowledge*, p. 253

I am not sure if you can say in just a few sentences what the benefits of partnerships on this level are. Something that made this course so successful was the multiple layers of collaboration—between students and faculty, between faculty members, between students, between faculty and community, and ultimately, between multiple partnerships of faculty, students, and community members. This was the case with the Whatcom Center for Early Learning.

Personally, I benefited most from seeing a course develop from its genesis to creation and completion. When I started this process last year with Joyce and Maria, I did not know where I would end up on the other side. Having never created a course, let alone taught one, I found the process engaging. Joyce has a way of getting excited about something, about a process, that makes it engaging. What made this course so beneficial was that I

***"What made this course so beneficial was that I was learning as I was teaching and vice versa."***

was learning as I was teaching and vice versa. Because we were teaching the course, there was a complete interplay of learning. Each course meeting brought new insights and understandings of material that none of us had brought up in planning. It was fascinating to be a student seeing a course like this unfold.

***"Each course meeting brought new insights and understandings of material that none of us had brought up in planning."***

I am glad to be a part of something like this. It is exciting to be able to undergo this sort of work with a faculty mentor. PAR breaks all sorts of traditional rules and understandings of what it means to be a scholar, teacher, and learner.

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