

Spring, 2007

# ARC News

## Action Research in Action: Susan Williams and the Highlander Center

On Tuesday, April 24th, the ARC welcomed Susan Williams of the Highlander Research and Education Center to the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center to share her experiences as a community organizer and educator in Appalachia in her talk *Unlearning to Learn - Tales of Community Organizing and Action Research from the Highlander Center*.

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The Highlander Center was founded in 1932 as an adult education center for community workers involved in social and economic justice movements, with a goal of providing education and support to poor and working-class people fighting for social justice. In addition, grassroots leaders gather skills to continue to build broad-based movements for change. The Highlander Center bases its work in the experiences of ordinary people as essential to understanding and improving problems within our society. They continue their work today through educational programs in Appalachia and the South to build social activism and community organizing that is led by those who suffer most through injustice in our society. Their work truly reflects "action" with the people of these communities educating and organizing each other.



Susan Williams shares her experiences

During her talk, Susan shared stories from her long personal history of community organizing and action research through her work with East Tennessee communities. She first explained her model for action research which resembled a spiral. It starts, she explained, with recognizing people's common experiences, beginning to identify patterns, adding new information, developing strategies for action, and culminating with taking action! Susan's experiences include ten years as a community organizer for Save Our Cumberland Mountains (SOCM), learning and working with community members to uncover archival information about land ownership and several years with the Tennessee Industrial Renewal Network organizing around fair trade and coordinating worker-to-worker exchanges between Mexico and Tennessee factory workers, as the excitement behind the institution of NAFTA allowed very little public information about the effects of plant closings and lost wages.. In addition, Susan worked with the 1979 Appalachian Land Ownership Study project where she continued to strive for "unlearning" the idea that 'expert' knowledge is superior to the people's knowledge.



Large crowd turned out for event

In addition to her talk, Susan brought Highlander's 75th anniversary timeline. The timeline charts Highlander's history from its early years as a school, through the labor movement and civil rights movements, to its ongoing work promoting economic justice and democratic participation across Appalachia, and new initiatives on immigration. It was a great way to see the evolution and breadth of Highlander's community work.

## Personal Perspective on Action Research: Lisa Vaughn

When I first read about community-based participatory research (CBPR) and participatory action research (PAR), it was as if I had a religious conversion of sorts! I learned about the ideology when I lived and worked in Guatemala over a 5+ year period. I had become involved in some rural development projects and at the same time happened to visit an experimental macadamia nut farm in Guatemala. As crazy as it sounds, I began thinking of ways that Mayan women, who are often exploited, uneducated, and isolated, could come together and grow macadamia nut trees. Of course my idealistic vision included indigenous women singing, laughing and dancing in merriment around their gigantic, well-pruned macadamia nut trees with pots of money earned all because of MY “perfect” plan! I envisioned agricultural fame and fortune for myself and the women because our magnificent trees would be growing so well due to more “acceptable” agricultural principles (the trees supposedly replenish the soil) replacing the typical slash-and-burn type of agriculture often used in Guatemala. (By the way, the last time I checked, Guatemala was one of the top four producers of macadamia nuts in the world.) I realized very quickly that I knew nothing about growing macadamia nut trees and even more importantly that my idea (however brilliant I thought I was!) wouldn’t work because it was coming from me, a complete outsider to be “imposed” on a group of women with whom I had no real connection. These women would likely view me as a foreigner (or “big whitey with a bad Spanish accent” as I often term it) interfering in their lives—not able to relate to me and probably wouldn’t want to. Although well-intentioned, at some level, I realized there was something problematic in my thinking about this project. That is when I read about some community psychology work based in Guatemala, northern Ireland, and South Africa about state-sponsored violence and recovery where PAR ideology and methodology had been applied (M. B. Lykes who I later discovered had many articles and a book chapter in acclaimed UC action researcher, Mary Brydon-Miller’s books—a small world!). This led me to some other work in liberation psychology which led me to Brazilian educator, theorist, and activist, Paulo Freire.

Through this initial introduction to CBPR, I realized that intellectually I had discovered something really important and appreciated the practical foundation for it - namely that really helping any community or group of people requires partnership, trust, and some shared experience and that your own idea of “helping” may not coincide at all with their idea of what they need or want. I just didn’t have a name for it or colleagues that supported it having come from the quantitative tradition of psychology.

One thing I particularly like about CBPR and PAR (plus all the other names it’s been called) is that it can be conceived as an approach to social investigation, an educational process, and a way to take action to address a problem—thus I can use the approach not only in research but when I teach and in any community/activist work. I like that in the truest form, the approach involves ALL stakeholders

not just those with power or money. I really like that from the beginning, such approaches were intended to promote social change. In the words of Ben W. M. Boog, “action research is designed to improve the researched subjects’ capacities to solve problems, develop skills (including professional skills), increase their chances of self-determination, and to have more influence on the functioning and decision-making processes of organizations and institutions in which they act” (2003). Such research implies that the objects that are being researched are empowered by their participation in the project. I like that work using such an approach seems to be more relevant, more meaningful, and actually “feels” better and “richer”. For me, CBPR approaches in a simplistic sense go back to the relationship between people which I ultimately believe is/should be the foundation of most everything. PAR projects allow the participants to express what they need or desire for themselves and their communities—they become empowered “doers” working toward positive change rather than distant subjects of a top-down inquiry.

Freire discusses “conscientisation” (or the awakening of critical consciousness) as the core of action research approaches. He believes that people go through a process first from “intransitive thought” (no control over their lives; experience defined by fate so actions cannot change conditions) to “semi-transitive thought” (fragmented thinking; a failure to connect problems to larger societal determinants) to the final stage of “critical transivity” (the achievement of conscientisation which involves being empowered to think critically and holistically about one’s condition and thus act on conditions). Freire believes that the final level of consciousness comes from a social process of learning characterized by dialogical and participatory relationships (Freire, 1973). Martin-Baró explains that Freire’s concept of conscientisation merges with personal consciousness and “makes manifest the historical dialect between knowing and doing, between individual growth and community organization, between personal liberation and social transformation” (Martin-Baró, 1994).

Because of my interest in immigrant populations, one example of an action research project with practical applications is a participatory action research (PAR) project with Somali refugees in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania. A group of refugees, volunteers, and researchers are working on ways to come up with adjustment strategies. During the process, the researchers gather data about the immediate needs of the Somali refugees and those assisting them. However, instead of collecting data “on” the researched (i.e., the refugees), the researchers are conducting the study “with” the researched. Their academic expertise, however, does help strengthen the community programs meant to empower the refugees. This particular project helps to coordinate different community programs, to prepare scholarly articles, and to develop handbooks necessary for resettlement efforts (Boog, 2003).

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## Creating Caring Connections in School-Age Girls Through Action Research

Relational aggression among girls has become a prevalent concern among schools, parents, and girls. Relational aggression is subtle and often involves behaviors such as isolation of other girls in lunchrooms and on playgrounds and whispering or spreading rumors about one another.

St. Pius Elementary in Edgewood, Kentucky, recognizes relational aggression as an issue and has taken steps to address it among 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade girls in their school using action research. For Kathy Voorhees, school counselor, it was important to develop a picture of the relational aggression among girls in the school. As such, she worked with girls in a Creating Caring Connections program to begin to take action to prevent aggressive behaviors. Ms. Voorhees met with girls regularly across the past school year to listen to their feelings related to bullying behaviors. In an effort to raise awareness of where the relational bullying was occurring, students participated in a mapping exercise to document the locations in school in which girl-to-girl bullying had occurred.



Many positive changes have emerged since the inception of this program. Especially following the mapping exercise, girls have increased significantly in their willingness to describe their feelings associated with their bullying experiences. In addition, girls have intentionally taken action to sit in the lunchroom with girls outside of their typical social clique in an effort to break down social barriers. Thus, not only has this pilot project increased knowledge and awareness of girl-to-girl bullying among female students at St. Pius, it has also helped to change attitudes and behaviors in the positive direction for these girls.

This is only the first step of this project. In the future, girls themselves will inform the actions to be taken next in educating and sustaining the momentum of creating a positive caring friendship environment for all girls in their school. Way to take action!

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Although not necessarily practical in every project and certainly a “hard sell” in many environments, I have welcomed the philosophy and principles of action research in several current projects with which I’m involved:

- Input to the Clinical and Translational Science Award (CTSA) community engagement working group about the usefulness and philosophy behind CBPR approaches (CTSA is a NIH funding mechanism designed to facilitate moving clinical and translational medical research “from bench to bedside and to and from the community”; Children’s, UC College of Medicine and the VA are applying for this in fall 2007).
- Latina Tween participatory needs assessment about Latina school-age girls’ perceptions of health (Phase 1 funded by Harmony Garden)
- Every Child Succeeds participatory evaluation pilot to supplement the quantitative data that they already gather (funded by the Education and Training department at Cincinnati Children’s)

- A book project with international colleagues about women, trauma and empowerment in post-authoritarian societies where the ideology behind PAR guided our inclusion of contributors (*Feminist Conversations: Women, Trauma and Empowerment in Post-Authoritarian Societies* to be published in fall 2007 by University Press of America)

### Sources:

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- Martin-Baró, I., (1994). *Writings for a liberation psychology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

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## Emily Nelson: Roundtable Discussion

In November 2007, the Action Research Center will be hosting Emily Nelson. Emily is an educational researcher and professional development facilitator in Hawke's Bay, New Zealand and recently completed her M.Ed. Her thesis research in 2004 used auto-photography and elicitation interviews to find out more about how early adolescent students perceive school and learning, their identity as learners and young people, and how they feel about the world in which they live. She will be traveling with a colleague from the University of Vermont, Penny Bishop, a renowned middle schooling educator and image-based researcher.

In February her thesis research won the AERA Middle Level Education Research Graduate Student Award. Emily is coming to the US in November to receive an award and present the findings of her research to the Middle Level SIG during the NMSA conference. Afterwards, she is traveling to the University of Vermont to speak to the staff and students there and has agreed to stop in Cincinnati to discuss our research and what we are doing currently. She is excited to meet other researchers who use image-based methodology coupled with listening to students. We are looking at November 12, 2007, but are still in the process of confirming travel dates. Hope you can join us. –Stephen Kroeger

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## Membership Invitation

We are now seeking faculty, students, staff, and community partners interested in joining us as members of the ARC.

Membership provides opportunities to:

- Participate in Center sponsored programs and workshops related to action research.
- Receive information about available grants, conferences, and publications.
- Develop collaborative relationships with colleagues and partners across the university and with community partners.

There is no membership fee required, just an interest in learning more about action research and a willingness to contribute to the Center's mission. If you are interested in joining us, or in learning more about the Center, please contact our membership coordinator:

Helen Meyer, Membership Coordinator  
helen.meyer@uc.edu