

## **Action Research SWRK 743, Summer I - 2017**

### **University of Pennsylvania - School of Social Policy and Practice**

#### **Course Overview**

Action Research is a research methodology that combines research with intervention or 'action.' It is characterized by a collaborative relationship between the researcher and an organization or community that perceives an issue of concern. The research/action can be to further define or understand the problem, to intervene, or to advocate for specific solutions. The course will be taught in a manner that is consistent with the principles of Action Research, with a focus on collaborative learning. In this course, we will:

- Review the process, principles, and epistemological underpinnings of Action Research;
- Develop skills needed to work as an action and participation-oriented researcher;
- Talk about power in the research process;
- Analyze case studies;
- Discuss issues of quality and rigor;
- Critique the limits of conventional methods of evidence based research;
- Examine the relevance and application of Action Research to the field of social work;
- Carry out at least the initial steps of an action research project.

The course is centered around a student-initiated action research project (see details below) which requires the student to conduct *at least two interviews - one with an individual leader, stakeholder, gatekeeper or practitioner in an area or community of interest, and another one (or two) interviews with a group of stakeholders, clients, community members in that same area of interest.* This project is ideally conducted within the context of a social work agency where the student is employed or is doing her/his field placement - but it doesn't have to be. I will consider a proposal from *two students* who wish to work together on this project - in such cases, page lengths for written assignments will be increased accordingly, for fairness. A portion of each class will be devoted to discussing and giving students time to plan how they will make contact with a community organization and carry out interviews.

#### **Required Texts**

Stringer, E.T. (2007). Action Research 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

All other required readings are available on CANVAS. Other readings of interest are also on CANVAS and may be distributed in class by instructor. Students wishing to share a relevant AR article with class can do so by asking the instructor. The course has changed over the years, readings added, readings retired, based on student contributions.

#### **Readings/Discussion**

Students are expected to come to class having read the articles/chapters assigned for that session and prepared to give their perspective on those readings. Students will sign up for class sessions to lead discussion on these readings. ALL students will post questions about the readings by 5pm the day before class. The discussant will choose 2-3 questions to use to facilitate class discussion the following day and will also provide the class with a short synopsis of readings, including key arguments. Students will sign up for weeks when they are to provide the class with a synopsis of the readings, including key arguments, and facilitate discussion by posing to the class a few thoughtful discussion questions. Preparedness for these discussions are an important part of the participation grade.

## **Course Assignments**

### **Assignment 1: (6 pages, double spaced) - Due Class 5 (May 30)**

The purpose of this assignment is to provoke your thinking about how research is conducted in your area of interest, and how that research relates to the people (communities, clients, service providers) who serve as its subjects. It consists of two steps.

Step 1. Identify one or two seminal works of research in your field (area of interest). You likely know what these are from assignments in your practice and policy related courses. These should be studies that are in the peer-reviewed academic and professional journals that are frequently cited by academics and practitioners. Review these studies with an eye for the following, and in the first part of your paper (roughly 3 pages), address:

- How was the problem or question being examined by the researcher defined or decided upon?
- What are the main concepts that shape and characterize the researchers' approach to studying this problem?
- What is the unit of analysis used by the researcher? (who/what is being studied and what tools were used to study it/them?)
- How would you characterize the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the researched?
- Are there other important decisions the researcher made about the research process, framing or analysis?
- What was the purpose of this research?
- How did researcher's decisions, conceptualization and relationship vis a vis the "researched" shape results/conclusions?

Step 2. Identify a stakeholder in your area of interest who does not identify her/himself as a researcher. This can be an advocate, a community leader, a client. It could be a group. Have a conversation with the stakeholder about the same topic addressed by the research you described in Step/part 1 of this paper (without telling them what your selected research writings said). Allow the

stakeholder to conceptualize the same issue in their terms. Take note of their conceptualization of the issues/problems using the same questions you used for the research articles. At the end of this conversation, introduce the research. The stakeholder may already know about it. Have a conversation about how the research perspective and the stakeholder perspective may be similar or different on the same issue. In part 2 of your paper (roughly 3 pages), address the following:

- What are the main similarities and differences in perspectives or conceptualization of the problem?
- How are these shaped by similarities or differences in units of analysis or relationship with the objects of study?
- What voices or ideas were heard in the stakeholder interview that you did not hear in the research?
- To what extent are both perspectives important to understanding this problem?
- To what extent do they complement one another? To what extent do they challenge one another?

**Assignment 2: Getting to know people and context (5 pages, double spaced) - Due Class 9 (June 13)**

In this assignment, you will engage a *group* (3 or more individuals) representing a community/organization in your area of interest and with whom you would (ideally) like to work with on an action research project (or at least help them think about and draft a plan for one). You will *facilitate a group discussion* with them, with the goal of helping them identify a common problem or issue of concern that they would (ideally) like to address collectively - this will be discussed and practiced in class. The stakeholder you interviewed in the first assignment should be able to introduce you to a group of staff/clients/members with whom you can conduct this group interview.

The community or organization can be a geographic community (i.e., neighborhood); an organizational community (i.e., staff or clients of a social service agency, a community group, an advocacy group); or it may be a community of identity (e.g., transgendered individuals, returning citizens). You will need to meet with this group at least once to begin to define of an issue of concern in order to complete this assignment.

In your paper answer the following questions:

- How do you define the community that you engaged?
- How did you gain access to stakeholders, leaders and/or members of this community?
- What procedures do you use to gather information for this assignment (in addition to interviewing)?
- What are the broad issues impacting this community or that they are engaged in (that they articulated and/or that you learned about from other sources)?

- Did you identify any specific issue of common concern among them (that could be potential action research topics)?
- What's the history of this specific issue/what's the context?
- To what extent has your initial conceptualization of this issue changed based on your group conversation?
- What are the tensions identified by the community within this issue? And what do you learn from these tensions?

### **Assignment 3: Defining the issue (1 page) - Due Class 11 (June 20)**

Defining the problem/issue with your stakeholders. Based on your (at least two) interviews (with the first individual stakeholder and with the group), as well as any other additional conversations you have had with them, and additional research and thinking, come up with a succinct statement of a problem confronted by the community. The last line of this page should be a focused question that can serve to guide the project.

### **Assignment 4: Plan of action. (6 pages, double spaced) - Due Class 14 (June 29)**

Option 1: If the action to be taken is to understand the issue further, design a collaborative research project. Define the issue being addressed, the question/s to be studied, and the specific research methods to be used (surveys, interviews, observation, photo journaling, etc.). This should have all the elements of a research proposal and should include specific plans for collaboration (between you as researcher and the stakeholders). What might be some barriers to collaboration, and how might they be overcome? What will be done with what is learned?

Option 2: If you have already gathered enough information with your co-researchers to plan action, write up an action plan. What is the action to be taken? Who will carry it out? How was the action decided and by whom? What barriers to collaboration were encountered in the process (of deciding on action)? What are the desired results of the proposed action? How will the action be evaluated? How will information about the project be disseminated and to whom?

Option 3: If you were able to collaborate with a community to plan and carry out an action, reflect back on the process. How was the issue identified? How was the action determined? What barriers to collaboration were encountered in the process? What was the result of the action taken? How is the action being evaluated/reflected on by the group? Has information about the project been disseminated/are there plans to disseminate information about the project? To whom? What would you do differently?

### **Assignment 5: Presentation - Due Class 14 (June 29)**

Each student will make a 10 minute presentation about their research project on the last class. Students will summarize the issue and the work done so far on the project, answer questions, discuss lessons learned, present any unique challenges or practical, ethical or power-related concerns that emerged. You may

also choose to create some sort of exercise that illustrates an aspect your project.

GRADING Your grade will be determined by:

- 20% from Assignment 1
- 25% from Assignment 2
- 5% from Assignment 3
- 25% from Assignment 4
  
- 15% from Attendance & Class Participation
- 10% from Final Presentation

Assignments are expected to be handed in on time. Late submissions will receive point deductions. Extensions can be discussed on a case-by-case basis in extenuating circumstances. But please notify me well in advance of the deadline.

Computers and phones should not be used regularly in class.

## **Course Sessions**

### ***Class 1 – May 16***

Course Overview

- What is Action Research?
- Go over the syllabus
- Initial discussion of students' topic interests
- Due: decide on issue/community to study, look for research article on that topic

### ***Class 2 – May 18***

What Is Action Research?

- Stringer, Chapters 1 & 2
- Discussion of: [Gaventa, J. \(1993\). The powerful, the powerless, and the experts: Knowledge struggles in the information age. In P. Park, M. Brydon-Miller, B. Hall, T. Jackson, Eds. \*Voices of change: Participatory research in the United States and Canada\*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, pp. 21-40.](#)
- and [Sohng, S. \(1996\). Participatory research and community organizing. \*Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare\*, 23\(4\), 77-95.](#)
- Discuss seminal work, potential stakeholders and how to reach out
- Assignment: make contact with a stakeholder to interview

### ***Class 3 – May 23***

Establishing Contact with the Community

- Stringer, Chapter 3

- Bray, J.N., Lee, J. (2000). *Collaborative inquiry in practice: Action, reflection, and meaning making*, Ch. 4 "Forming a collaborative inquiry group," Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 50-69
- Discuss seminal works; interviewing stakeholders
- Due: Bring in seminal work(s)
- Due: conduct first stakeholder interview

#### **Class 4 - May 25**

##### Gathering Information and Defining the Issue

- Stringer, Chapter 4
- Fine, M., Torre, M.E., Boudin, K., et al. (2001). Participatory Action Research: From within and beyond prison walls. In P. Camic, J.E. Rhodes, & L. Yardley (Eds.), *Qualitative research in psychology: Expanding perspectives in methodology and design*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Check in on progress
- Due: conduct first stakeholder interview

#### **Class 5 – May 30**

##### Interpreting and Analyzing

- Stringer, Chapter 5
- Brydon-Miller, M. (1993). Breaking down barriers: Accessibility self-advocacy in the disabled community. In P. Park, M. Brydon-Miller, B. Hall, T. Jackson (Eds.), *Voices of change: Participatory research in the United States and Canada*, Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, pp. 125-43.
- Sullivan, M., Bhuyan, R., Senturia, K., Shiu-Thornton, S., & Ciske, S. (2005). Participatory action research in practice: A case study in addressing domestic violence in nine cultural communities. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 20(8), 977-995.
- Discuss potential groups for Assignment 2 - who will be included and how
- Due: Assignment 1

#### **Class 6 – June 1**

##### Acting

- Stringer, Chapter 6
- Bray, J.N., Lee, J. (2000). *Collaborative inquiry in practice: Action, reflection, and meaning making*, Ch. 6 "Making meaning and constructing knowledge," pp. 88-120. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Whitmore, E., McKee, C. (2001). Six street youth who could... In P. Reason and H. Bradbury, *Handbook of Action Research: Participative inquiry and practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 396-402
- Practice group facilitation

#### **Class 7 – June 6**

## Accepting Complexity

- Shdaimah, et al (2011) *Change Research* Chapters 3 and 5 (p. 52-63 and 82-103) (Not Chap. 4)
- Shdaimah, et al (2011) *Change Research* Chapter 6 (p. 104-119)
- Shdaimah, et al (2011) *Change Research* Chapters 7-8 (p.120-171) (Not Chapter 8)
- Check in on progress

## **Class 8 – June 8**

### Analyzing and Disseminating

- **Guest Speaker: Nora Gross**
- Stringer, Chapter 7
- Horton, B.D. (1993). The Appalachian Land Ownership Study: Research and action in Appalachia. In P. Park, M. Brydon-Miller, B. Hall, T. Jackson (Eds.), *Voices of change: Participatory research in the United States and Canada*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, pp. 85-102.
- Young, L. and Barret, H. (2000). Adapting visual methods: action research with Kampala street children *Area* 33(2), 141–152.
- Check in re: facilitation & discuss action plans

## **Class 9 – June 13**

### Power: Why Action Research revisited

- Readings: TBD
- **Guest Speaker - SexGen Policy Lab**
- Due: Assignment 2

## **Class 10 – June 15**

### Examining Action Research Case Studies

- Baldwin, M. (2001). Working together, learning together: Co-operative inquiry in the development of complex practice by teams of social workers. In P. Reason and H. Bradbury, *Handbook of Action Research: Participative inquiry and practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 287-92.
- Townsend et al
- Castleden, et al "Modifying Photovoice for community-based participatory Indigenous research" *Social Science & Medicine* 66 (2008) 1393e1405

## **Class 11 – June 20**

### Examining Action Research Case Studies

- Cannuscio, et al "Visual epidemiology: Photographs as tools for probing street-level etiologies" *Social Science & Medicine* 69 (2009) 553-564
- Maguire, P (2001). Uneven ground: Feminisms and Action Research. In P. Reason and H. Bradbury, Eds. *Handbook of Action Research: Participatory inquiry and practice*. New York: Sage, pp. 59-69
- Whose Side Are You On?
- Due: Assignment 3

### **Class 12 – June 22**

The Challenge and Promise of Collaborative Research

- Stringer, Chapter 8
- Stringer, Chapter 9
- Dyrness, A. Research for Change versus Research as Change: Lessons from a Mujerista Participatory Research Team
- Discuss: Reimagining traditional research as action research

### **Class 13 – June 27**

Critiques

- Readings: TBD

### **Class 14 – June 29**

- Due: Assignment 5 - Student presentations
- Debrief class experience
- Due: Assignment 4 (paper)