

BEYOND THE IVORY TOWER

A Readers' Theater

I. Defining Research

Moderator: To start off, let's try to define research. What does research mean for your organization?

Joanna: I view research as a process of identifying intriguing problems or questions, developing some theories about the issue, conducting a methodologically-sound study guided by these theories, and finally, disseminating the results in a way that solves the problem.

Yvonne: Our folks who are on the ground--the students, the leaders, the members--actively collect information from their daily experiences. We also use data that is available on the internet or on district websites. And we work with partners, like the folks at IDEA, to do broader and deeper investigation of these issues.

Mary: Research is information on conditions such as lack of textbooks, lack of credentialed teachers, and bad facilities. Our schools have high levels of suspensions, and poor communication with parents. They lack bathrooms, or if they have bathrooms, they are locked. These are the things that we need to document and bring back to the district to show the conditions in our schools.

Julie M: Research should make a difference. It should inform more equitable college preparation and access.

Julie F: Research needs to be broadcast. It needs to be utilized to change the way people think about an issue and to motivate them to act. While researchers can do the research and report on it, community organizations can use the information to act, to agitate, to empower and to inform.

Moderator Does it include information from research institutions?

Joanna: Absolutely. As a trained scholar in the academy, I have been taught to value empirical research which is published in prestigious, peer-reviewed journals.

Luis: Historically, that kind of research never really trickles down to create real policy. Organized research is not powerful if it is not connected to organized people. I believe that movements, not research, create change. When you put them together it can be really powerful.

Moderator: What about information that is gathered directly in the community? What is the value of that kind of research?

Joanna: We can't reform schools to better serve the community without the participation of the community. In order to both identify a problem and hypothesize a solution, it helps to be really familiar with the entire situation. Community organizers have knowledge of the problem's context, relationships with key players in the community, and an increased sense of urgency for solving the problem effectively. The trust of the community that these organizers' bring to a study helps immensely in gathering honest, rich data.

Mary: Research is the means our organization uses because if we have no evidence, no data, then we just have an argument. Before we used to go to the administration and say we have this problem, and they would say, "Well, show us." Now we can actually show them, through our survey results, and say: "Here, this is where we had a focus group. This is how many parents were present. And this is the schools that they attend. I think that's what makes us so powerful and unique as a parent group.

Luis: We believe that research is key to the work that we do. As we try to advance an agenda around education justice, we want school officials and elected leaders to

understand that we know the data, we have access to it, and we'll hold them accountable.

Julie M: Research generated by the community helps to ground me in my reality. Its focus on justice, equity, and basic civil rights reminds me that we can choose to live our lives to bring about a more just world.

Yvonne: In Long Beach we did a local campaign around school facilities, specifically the bathroom conditions. Students took photos and did a lot of action research with surveys documenting the conditions. We documented everything from bathroom doors that didn't work, to locked bathrooms, broken plumbing, the over-spilling sewage, the lack of soap, paper towels, toilet paper, or just basic supplies that students need. We met with school administrators who explained their own constraints with their resources around the maintenance staff and recommended that we talk to district administrators. Students were really frustrated with the district's response because they blamed students for wasting toilet paper and told them they needed to direct their conversation to their peers.

So we planned an event at the district, where we invited the media, and we displayed the photos. By publicly exposing the problem, students were able to get the district to address the problem. The district implemented policies such as daily checks to ensure that bathrooms had sufficient supplies that students need. They invited the health department to come in and conduct random inspections. And they increased the custodial staff so bathrooms could be open, accessible, and stocked with the needed supplies.

Moderator: What makes research credible to community groups? Does it matter who produces it?

Luis: It matters, on some level, that we're working collaboratively with UCLA. When you're trying to move an equity focused policy agenda with both parents and students a lot of them ask where this information came from. It helps to tell them that we've been working with professors at UCLA to show that it is something we haven't made up.

Yvonne: Academic research brings its own credibility and validity because that's the kind of research we are conditioned to value. Academic research is thought to be the pinnacle. But, I think the research that gets generated from sources that have similar social justice, human rights values has great credibility with our constituents. Research that is credible to our constituents is research that validates our experiences. There's a lot of research out there that invalidates our experience like research from the Heritage Foundation and folks on the right.

John: For university created research, or community-driven research the same questions apply: Does this research begin with a question that matters to people? Do the investigators explore a number of alternative ways to make sense of this problem? Do they consider how this problem is related to structures of power and inequality in our society? Do they make conscious and informed decisions about how to gather information that would inform the problem at hand? Do they gather this data in a way that others outside the process can understand and trust? Do they seek to make sense of this new information in ways that kept open a number of different possible explanations? Do they share their work with all interested parties? Does it effect change?

Moderator: Do district officials respond differently to research that UCLA has done from research that your organization has done?

Luis: School officials always ask us where we get our information. For many years, the "disappearance" or dropout rates we talked about were very different from the ones the district reported. Our numbers were always being questioned. Now, when district officials see the research done in collaboration with IDEA, they say, "Oh this is real information and not just something created by a grassroots organization." The sad part is this is the reality and that's why these collaborations are so critical.

Julie F: What Luis says is interesting. In our work I've noticed that it seems like groups sometimes want the imprint or blessing from university researchers. Let's face it, we live in a society where appearances mean a lot and people have limited time to read complete research reports. Sometimes just the imprint of a name can get a lot of credibility, and get a lot of attention.

Mary: I think that the research that Parent U-Turn does gets more respect because they know that we are people from Lynwood or South Gate. They know that we're doing research and they know that it comes from people within the community. And they know that Parent U-Turn has the connections with the community, the churches, and the schools that can support this information. With politicians, research is good to show, but what matters most is the number of people in the organization and how fast you can organize them.

Moderator: When you talk about research to the membership of a community organization, what terminology do you use? Do you talk differently from policymakers?

Yvonne: When I'm talking with students I use the language of investigation, uncovering, and exposing the facts. I encourage students to understand that they are the agents in doing that. It is really important that we know what students are thinking and feeling about the policy and how it's impacting them.

Luis: We try not to use different language when we're talking to our members because we're developing leaders and they have to speak the same language as people who have power. When we train our staff and members we try to use the terminology similar to what we use with decision-makers.

Mary: I used to resist the word "research" because I thought it was a bad word. I thought that most researchers were disconnected from the community. But now I see we have to

be researchers if we want to make change. We tend to be more involved in the local community than a researcher at a university, and we keep a human face on the community we research because we know the people and they are a reality to us.

Moderator: What about the researchers? When you talk about research to members of a community organization, what terminology do you use? Is it different when you talk to policymakers?

Michelle: I try to stay away from jargon when talking to either group. With organizations I try and show how the data backs up what they already know. I will take more time to have an interactive discussion. With policymakers, they want the point fast and quick. I always try and stay on message- I don't think they can hear enough that it is the conditions that cause failing schools, not the students or parents. Systemic inequality. I say it over and over like I am hammering a nail into their brain.

John: I make an effort to use more or less the same materials when speaking with youth and parents as with educational researchers. I remember a few years back going to hear Cornel West speak at a church in a low-income community in Detroit. I was struck by the fact that he spoke in much the same language that day that he had used when speaking to a university colloquium at the University of Michigan a couple months before. On one level this speaks to the fact that any audience can meaningfully make sense of serious intellectual work as long as the ideas are communicated with integrity and connected to the context at hand. On another level this speaks to the value of plain talk for university researchers—even when, or particularly when, they are speaking to their colleagues.

Moderator: One of the tools you all have used is computer generated, GIS maps. What about the process of making maps, makes the maps so useful?

Joanna: In a technology workshop I led for community organizations, a few organizers from Inner City Struggle explored a data site I had recommended and quickly discovered that Junior ROTC enrollment figures were included in course enrollment data. The large military presence at East Los Angeles high schools had been a concern of this organization, and now they had the data to help them examine the scope of the problem. After they showed me the dataset, I produced a JROTC enrollment map which displayed the concentration of military programs in schools located in communities of color. Inner City Struggle then used this map to argue for a decreased JROTC presence in East LA schools. It was a true, collaborative, reciprocal teaching moment.

Michelle: We first made the College Opportunity maps for elected officials. In one clear shot they see all the schools in their district. When they look closer they see the inequalities, especially between schools, and by income. A map gives them something to connect the numbers to—something compelling. I don't know that the maps changed anyone's opinion, but they sure give elected officials and community members something to hold up and justify a redistributive policy with.

Luis: We've been using the College Opportunity maps for the last 2 years to build membership and support for our high school campaign. We use College Opportunity maps to visually show differences in course offerings between our schools and those in wealthier communities. It's important to show our parents that there are schools that successfully prepare students not only to graduate but also for college. Our Parents need to know that there are schools in Los Angeles that do it and that it's not a pipe dream. Numbers are not always the best way to illustrate an issue because it's easy to get lost in the numbers sometimes.

Julie M: I'm an urban planner and I have been making GIS maps for more than 15 years. I cannot think of a better way to summarize massive amounts of Census and school data to contextualize problems.

John: The power of maps is that they appeal to people's cognitive desire to recognize patterns. When people see a bunch of red dots indicating substandard schools concentrated at the center of the city, they 'discover' that there is a relationship between race, geography, and educational opportunity. This 'discovery' engages the participants in ways that are fundamentally different than the process people go through when they are merely told that such a relationship exists.

Joanna: I often find that parents and students situate themselves on the maps, eagerly identifying important landmarks in their neighborhood. As they become part of the map, they understand the information it communicates. You don't need formal statistical knowledge to see that the schools with the most problems are located in your community.

John: GIS maps are an extraordinarily democratic tool. I've presented them at workshops with youth and public meetings with immigrant parents as well as at policy briefings with elected officials and at research meetings. The maps are compelling to all these audiences. This communicative power of the maps lies in their seeming simplicity and their apparent rigor. What I mean by that is that people can immediately make sense of the patterns in the colors and symbols. And, people recognize that these symbols stand in for real and very complex conditions and relationships.

Julie M: Because they communicate ideas so powerfully, they help level the playing field in a high stakes accountability environment. Educational opportunity maps help community organizers hold elected officials and school administrators accountable for disparities in school resources

Moderator: What about using survey research? Luis and John, you worked on a survey project together for Inner City Struggle. Tell us about that process.

Luis: IDEA helped us think about how we were going to survey students on course offerings in their high school as part of our campaign to gain the same college prep courses in our neighborhood as in the wealthier neighborhoods.

John: When Inner City Struggle youth conducted this survey, they became political agents. They asserted their right to gather information. The questions and format of the survey communicated powerful ideas to other students about what issues deserve attention and how youth can take action when they become dissatisfied. And they forced school officials to take them seriously.

Michelle: That work is so powerful! I went to a community meeting a couple of weeks ago and saw Luis' colleague, Maria, present data from the survey Inner City Struggle did. It was inspiring to see her present the data- it made it more real somehow than all the times I watch academics present about school conditions- here was someone working every day in the community, who knows this data because her members are the students that make up the numbers, Bringing that together is persuasive.

Moderator: Joanna and Yvonne, tell us about the process of developing a research report on the California High School Exit Exam.

Joanna: During CFJ's campaign to delay the High School Exit Exam, I provided a series of maps to show the connections between student demographics, passing rates, and access to qualified teachers.

Yvonne: These maps went into a report we published. When our community got involved in the campaign they realized that poor test performance is connected to things like teacher quality. They started asking questions like, “Are my teachers credentialed?” The data helped youth understand that low test scores are the result of systemic educational inequality.

Joanna: When CFJ worked on their High School Exit Exam report, they were quite savvy in their data requests. They wanted to include GIS maps on each of their six focus communities in this report; yet, GIS mapping is a technical process in which they had no expertise, and thus, I became involved in the project. Importantly, the leaders’ deep knowledge of the demographics and educational conditions allowed them to envision which maps they wanted to include.

Moderator: Mary and John, you have been working together for quite some time, describe to us the nature of the relationship between Parent-U-Turn and IDEA.

Mary: Over the last the four years, I have built a positive relationship with university researchers. I used to think that researchers’ work was just a number on a chart or graph with no human connection. I met some rare and unique researchers who connect their work with human faces and experiences, going beyond the traditional roles. The researchers from IDEA and Center X embrace the parents as colleagues even though we don't have a Ph.D.. They respect the cultural resources of our struggles and experiences.

John: Mary and I began working together a few years back when she and members of Parent U Turn joined IDEA’s parent advocacy seminar. In the first few months of this relationship, I was primarily a source of information. But, our relationship began to develop further when Mary and the leaders of Parent U Turn attended IDEA’s summer institute with high school students. The Institute provided the parent leaders an opportunity to engage social theory as a tool for making sense of their lived experience. We read Freire and a variety of sociologists speaking to the social reproduction of

inequality. This process was a struggle and it was revelatory. It opened up deep conversations about our shared and different experiences along lines of race, class, and immigrant status. And it forged new levels of understanding and trust that have carried forward to campaigns since.

Mary: This relationship has really grown with time. And so has our power. Now, when we talk to administrators or when we talk to the teachers union, we talk in their language. And it shocks them. We talk about quantitative data and stuff like that. It shocks them. They stand back and say, “Wow!” But I think that every parent should have the opportunity to be just like us, and have the opportunity to learn these skills.

Moderator: These are pretty comprehensive projects. What kind of capacity does an organization need to successfully engage in a research project?

Luis: We needed to learn how to ask the right questions on surveys. How to ask objective questions that are not leading. IDEA showed us how to develop focus groups to test out questions to see if they work. IDEA also developed research training workshops to train our organizers and members to access state education data and present it using different technologies. Since then we’ve used the curriculum from these research workshops as part of the training for our members so that they can really be researchers themselves.

Moderator: Let’s flip the question around. What capacity do researchers need to successfully work with a community organization?

Joanna: I need to be able to connect the organization’s data requests with the availability of public datasets or other scholarly research. To do that, I really need to have an understanding of the way an organization is framing the problem, and what publicly available data can inform the issue. I also needed some late nights. Sometimes, research on demand for a hot campaign topic just can’t wait.

Julie M: Yes. You need to learn to be respectful, patient, humble, flexible, and resourceful.

III. Relationships with Community Organizations and Research

Moderator: This work all happens in the context of human relationships. How would you describe the relationship between community organizers and university researchers?

Michelle: I think respect comes first and foremost in these relationships. The organizers are the experts, I am just the person who knows how to take information and process it into a pretty data or fact. I also have to always be aware of my white privilege and the class privilege I have as an academic who has had a high quality education courtesy of the unjust California public schools system. I can share outrage, and I can share data, but I will never know just how upsetting it is to hear that my school is the most overcrowded in the state, or that my child won't go to college because they simply didn't have enough teachers or classrooms to help all students complete the A-G coursework.

Julie F: It is important to say that we don't decide what research or data is useful to the community groups, we try to respond to what they say they need, what they want. We work in close collaboration with different organizations and sometimes might offer suggestions, but we act on a "research on demand" basis.

John: I have had different relationships with the different groups I work with. In some cases, my role has been to provide information. In other cases, I offer guidance on methodology. In still other cases, I have a more substantive role engaging groups in discussions about how to make sense of the conditions in their schools and what might be done to transform these conditions.

Mary: When people used to refer to me as researcher, I would correct them and say, "No I'm a parent". My image of a researcher was a person that had no human contact. At Parent-U-Turn meetings, my members call me "little John." Now I realize that I have crossed over and stepped into a world of numbers and charts without losing the human side. Then in the same manner, my mentor John Rogers embraced a change because of our relationship. I always give him a grade on his presentations—both the content and the style. Now, he presents differently, based on some of my feedback.

Moderator: What strengths do you bring to community organizing and research?

Joanna: I bring a larger understanding of the breadth of the problem, the presence of the problem in other communities, and often, an historical context to the problem. They bring a deeper, more local knowledge of the problem, contextualizing it within other concerns of the community.

Luis: We have the people that are most impacted by the system. Our parents and students attend schools that are underserved. When our members do research and think through what questions would be key, in the end they are the ones that are going to have to push the agenda. It should be them because they are the people most impacted by policy. Researchers bring a wealth of information to the partnership. They're always finding new research that helps support the work that we are doing. IDEA can give us the answer to questions within a day that would take us two weeks to figure out.

Julie F: In my relationship with organizers, I am very conscious of being from the university or "the ivory tower" as some call it. I am also very conscious of being white and having the power and privilege of my racial identity along with the power and privilege associated with my university affiliation.

Michelle: I work with community organizations on a regular basis. It is a reciprocal relationship more than anything. I help with what I can; sharing data IDEA has

developed, getting contact to elected officials, networking. And the community groups power the campaign and action that makes research turn into a reality. If they weren't there, a lot of these ideas would just stay buried in a library. They breathe life into ideas and concepts and findings. They generate many of the research questions and directions. But the relationship has been based on mutual respect, both for each other and the unique roles each group can bring to the table.

IV. Knowledge and Power

Moderator: How is generating new knowledge different from or similar to building power?

Michelle: The education system is the foundation of all social reform. If people don't have information, and the ability to use that information to change the world, progressive change isn't possible. So I figure you get two for one when it comes to working on education issues, you get to find current fixes to the inequalities in today's schools, but you also ensure that more people, from more diverse places get the opportunity to learn to think critically and engage in society. That participation then leads to fixing other inequalities.

Yvonne: I think creating knowledge and creating a new perspective is very important. The folks that we are working with have had very limited opportunities to have a perspective outside of a very narrow geographic experience. Having them physically see other places and being introduced to new perspectives, to new ideas, to history, to information, to role models, is all really critical in terms of building power collectively. It also empowers folks to be able to do this work and be agents of social change who win campaigns to improve schools across the state.

John: The leaders at Inner City Struggle say that when a young person walks through their doors, she must be treated as if she will become the organization's Executive

Director some day. Now, when you have this view, that every participant in your community is a potential leader, that everyone on the margin will one day define the core, then you take capacity building seriously. You organize your practice so that participants are constantly learning, constantly developing. Generating knowledge for campaigns is all part of a broader process of building the understanding and capacity of members.

Luis: Movements that work collaboratively to push forward a social justice agenda are much more powerful. Working with research institutions helps us build our capacity to get there. I believe that it's going to take organized research and organized folks to move that agenda forward.

Julie F: Being able to see that your own problems are not just personal, individual problems, but are felt and experienced across an entire community, is empowering --- you realize that you are not alone. You realize the problem is bigger than you --- and you begin to realize the need to join with others to fight, and to join together to come up with solutions to solve those problems.

Mary: I don't think there is a difference between generating knowledge and building power. Knowledge is power. To have power is to have knowledge. No knowledge! No Power! No Changes!