

CoLab's Role in Supporting Action Research in Urban Studies and Planning at MIT

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During a special seminar over the one-month January term known as Independent Activities Period (IAP), a group of students, staff and faculty examined the importance of Action Research within the Department of Urban Studies and Planning. We reviewed the writings of national and international scholars who have embraced Action Research (AR) in their work [e.g., Reason and Bradbury, *Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice*, Sage, 2001] and explored how AR could be employed successfully within the department.

AR is an approach to question-asking and answering that puts a premium on direct engagement between the subjects and users of applied social science research. It does not adhere to the usual academic conventions that create inter-personal barriers between the researcher and the people and places they seek to help. AR is not concerned about the replicability of research findings in the same way that natural scientists are. The legitimacy of AR findings derives primarily from the contributions its adherents make to helping people and communities address the problems they face in their everyday lives.

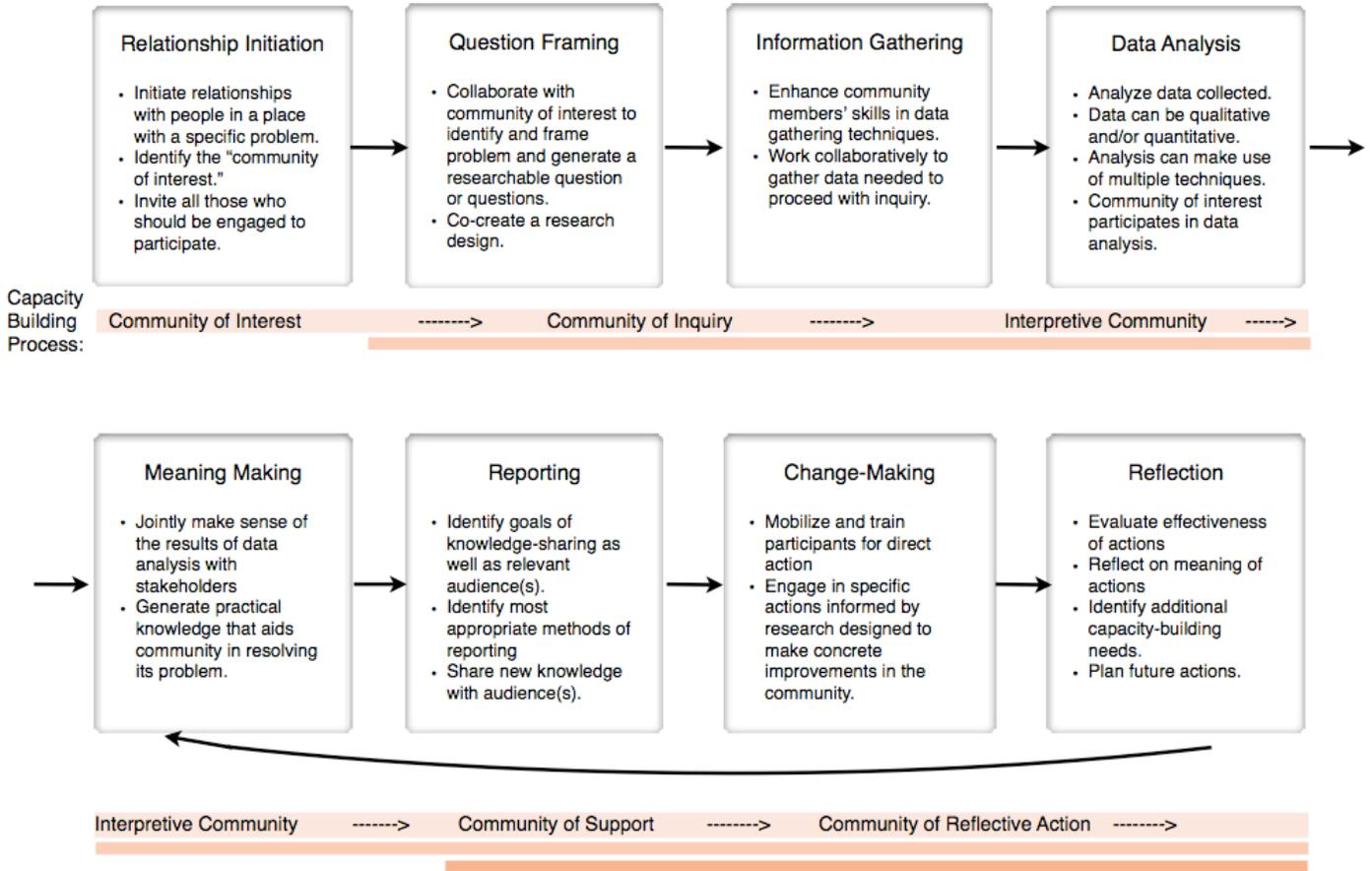
While we think it is realistic for young faculty in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning to succeed academically as AR practitioners, there is no doubt that they will face obstacles that most of their colleagues who employ more traditional social science methods will not. While AR scholars employ both quantitative and qualitative research techniques, they are less inclined to pursue statistical analysis that doesn't value face-to-face interaction between the researcher and the individuals and groups he or she is seeking to help. While traditional social scientists aim primarily to answer the next question on a research frontier, AR practitioners are more interested in responding to whatever the pressing needs are of particular groups and places.

Here is an eight-step Action Research Framework developed by one of the IAP Workshop participants after many hours of group conversation. It describes an elaborate set of interactions that move from relationship initiation, to question framing, information gathering, data analysis, meaning-making, reporting, change-

making and ultimately to reflection. Many of these steps would probably not be viewed as part of a valid research design by those who use traditional social science methods.

Diagram #1

Action Research Framework and Workflow



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AR practitioners and the people who are the focus of their research are members of overlapping intentional communities. They begin as members of a shared community of interest with a concern about addressing a problem in one or more places. They are also, subsequently, part of a community of inquiry, an interpretive community, a community of support and a community of reflective action. There are tasks or responsibilities that AR scholars and the people they interact with must complete at each step of the Action Research

Framework. Students who are committed to an AR approach, must know how to complete these tasks.

Department of Urban Studies and Planning (DUSP) students should have more opportunities to learn about AR theory and practice. From time-to-time, classes should be taught by faculty who embrace AR. More importantly, there should be field-based assignments in connection with studios, practica, and internships provide opportunities for students to try out AR techniques.

The Community Innovator's Lab (CoLab) can and should serve as the primary source of support for students and faculty who want to enhance the focus on AR. CoLab could offer regular one-day seminars for students who want to learn about AR. Second, CoLab could prepare on-line instructional materials (with introductions and worked examples explaining how each of the eight steps in the Action Research Framework were handled in real cases). Third, CoLab could offer to meet at the beginning of each semester with any and all interested faculty to talk about ways in which AR principles and practices might be incorporated into their field-based research and teaching.

With its commitment to engaging students in communities and incorporating community knowledge into the academy, CoLab is ideally positioned to take the lead in making information on and training in Action Research more broadly available within DUSP. Subsequent IAP seminars can offer more advanced training in specific aspects of Action Research and assess CoLab's progress in supporting AR within the Department.