TEACHING NOTE:

PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH WITH COMMUNITY DIALOGUES FOR ACTION

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Introduction

This Teaching Note summarizes a type of participatory research called Community
Dialogues for Action (CDA), which has been developed by the Social Justice Initiative (SJI)
at Bryn Mawr College. The SJI was founded and is led by Dr. Darlyne Bailey, who has
distilled the CDA model via 30+ years of research experience in communities both large
and small. The SJI is committed to using CDA to effectively engage community-based
experts as "co-inquirers" (Wolf, 1980) in designing and conducting the research to
determine how to address the structural inequities that directly affect them.

Case Overview/Synopsis

CDA situates itself at the end of a methodological continuum that begins with action
research (AR) and evolves through participatory action research (PAR) and community-
based participatory research (CBPR) (Collins, et al., 2018; Wallerstein & Duran, 2003). In
social work community practice and other disciplines, these types of participatory
research foster collaboration with a community (Ohmer, et al, 2022). Pioneering social
psychologist Kurt Lewin (1946) coined the term "action research" as a form of social
research and social management within organizations. A key aspect of AR is feedback: a

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loop of action, research, and training that involves all concerned and affected by the project, with the goal to promote consensus and solutions to internal problems. Wallerstein and Duran (2003) frame AR as part of a "Northern tradition" of participatory research. While still utilized in some settings (e.g., those characterized by relatively stable and equitable power dynamics), AR is often criticized as a top-down approach to help countries in the Global South, which had the effect of disempowering the people intended to benefit from it (Wallerstein & Duran, 2003).

In the 1970s, Brazilian educator Paulo Freire argued that praxis – the integration of action and reflection – should not be "the privilege of some few persons, but the right of everyone" (p. 88). In contrast to top-down practices, PAR was greatly influenced by Freire's critical pedagogy and mandate to involve the people being impacted in research processes. He advocated for research for liberation, for pulling on collective voice to develop a critical consciousness through the power of dialogue. Thus, PAR exists as part of the "Southern tradition" of participatory research that acknowledges and illuminates societal inequities and directly acts to shift the balance of power in favor of community (Wallerstein & Duran, 2003). A contemporary example of PAR is the Neighborhood Story Project, with its core commitment to community participation in addressing questions of power and inequality (Thurber, 2020).

CBPR is a research practice that is less easily traced to a specific individual, emerging in the 1990s from public health efforts to address inequities (Israel, et al., 2017), at a time when community-based research practices in general were becoming more formalized (Sclove, et al., 1998; Community Health Scholars Program, 2001). CBPR has

evolved over time and expanded to numerous fields, including psychology (Collins, et al., 2018), environmental justice (Tucker & Taylor, 2004), regional planning (Duke, 2020), and social work (Loughran & McCann, 2015). Like AR, PAR, and participatory research in general, CBPR has three interconnected goals of research, action, and education. The principles of CBPR include engaging collaboratively and equitably with the community (Community Health Scholars Program, 2001) and treating the community as the unit for identity while balancing research with action (Duke, 2020; Israel, et al., 2017).

Like all research, CDA is grounded in the practice of curiosity and intentionality. The dimensions of this include both the Freirean sense of "epistemological curiosity" – searching for meaning together with the recognition that all can teach and all can learn (Leistyna, 2004) – and the "formalized curiosity" of Zora Neale Hurston (1942) which involves "poking and prying with a purpose" (p. 91). CDA draws on all three participatory research traditions: the practice of soliciting participant feedback of AR; the principles of dialogue and critical consciousness of PAR; and the concept of intervening at the community level from CBPR – with a key difference in how to frame the relationship between the researchers and the community studied. While we could conceive of most forms of participatory research as operating via an "us" relationship, CDA conceptualizes a "we" relationship – assertively moving the community participants from a shared experience to collective action. The CDA process is intentionally co-created from beginning to end through dialogue and active engagement with the SJI's (2025) "Four Pathways to Justice": forgiveness, cultural humility, courage and compassion, and radical love (Bailey, Spath & Koney, 2025). All Four Pathways are active processes, not end states,

which work best when used *together* as we genuinely seek connections within, between, and among individuals and others (Bailey, 2025).

CDA elicits the thinking and amplifies the voices of those who are usually left out of the policymaking conversations that directly impact them, unfolding over a multiphase iterative process. CDA begins by putting together an Action Research Team (ART) comprised of the researchers, community members, and other stakeholders. The ART works as a unit to identify research questions and explore answers through gathering data, studying to understand the data, generating recommendations, and disseminating findings. One paradox of CDA is that it calls for forming the ART to shape the research questions from the very beginning, while the application process of most higher educational Internal Review Boards (IRB) depend on the researchers receiving approval *before* engaging the community as co-inquirers in the project. Fortunately, the iterative process allows for a preliminary IRB approval of broad questions and methods of gathering data, with the ability to cycle back for revised approval as the ART evolves its own collective questions and methods. Finally, CDA begins with realizing a "need for action" that emerges from the community while forming the ART; CDA then ends with a more defined "Call to Action" as a result of what was learned in response to the questions and throughout the process.

Figure 1 illustrates the cyclical nature of CDA, while showing that the core practice of Dialogue is woven throughout the entire process. Figure 2 enumerates the characteristics of each Phase, with recognition that there is much overlap and circling back as the ART remains responsive to the community concerns that emerge over time.

Figure 1: Phases of Community Dialogues for Action

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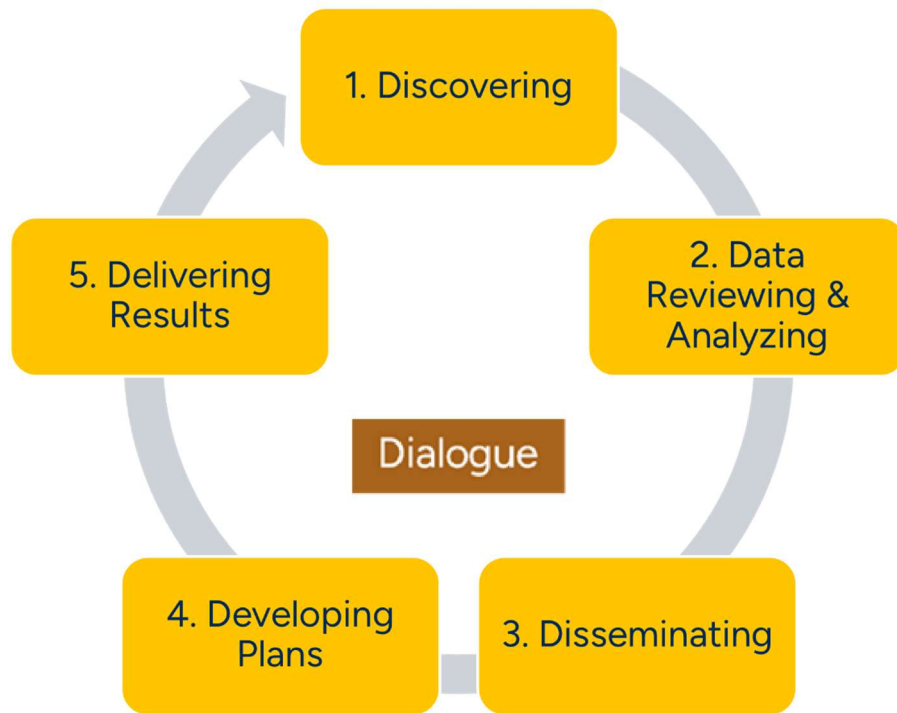
Figure 2: Characteristics of the Phases of Community Dialogues for Action

Dialogue is the core practice throughout each of the Phases.
Guided by the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970),
the SJI views Dialogue as comprised of 3 parts:
- Unconditional Care of Self and Other
- Positive Regard for Self and Other
- Trust in Self and Other

1. Discovering	2. Data Reviewing & Analyzing	3. Disseminating	4. Developing Plans	5. Delivering Results
Realize a need for action	Identify data sources	Share findings with other stakeholders	Determine implications	Act on recommendations
Develop Action Research Team (ART)	Gather data	Facilitate ideas and connections	Prioritize actions that emerge from the Data Review & Analysis and Dissemination phases	Evaluate actions
Establish common understanding of project, mission, and CDA goals	Investigate data			Evolve for greater impact
	Generate collective understanding			Call to Action
Define/redefine research questions	Develop recommendations			

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Teaching Objectives

1. Understand the importance of dialogue, action, and the Four Pathways to Justice as integral to community-based research using CDA.

2. Develop capacity through knowledge building and self-awareness to support applying the iterative phases of CDA.

3. Learn how to apply CDA to translate research findings into "Calls to Action" for sustainable policy change.

Target Audience

Social work students and faculty, macro-engaged and macro-informed.

Teaching Plan

This Teaching Note is organized to support teaching the attached case: *Community Dialogues for Action with Neighbors Helping Neighbors on the Main Line: CDAs with NHN* (2025). The reader will note that in *CDAs with NHN*, Dialogue appears as a separate phase, but CDA continues to evolve because it is a method in which all participants are changed. In discussion with the ART in that project, the SJI co-inquirers realized that Dialogue served as a critical component of ALL phases and therefore is now woven throughout the entire CDA process.

We envision this case as part of required and/or elective courses on community-based research. The overall goal of teaching this case is to provide students with an equitable and liberatory methodology for use in research, public policy, organizational management, community development, health planning, education, and other initiatives.

Although not framed as such herein, this case can also be developed into a standalone course in which students partner with local nonprofits and community groups to work through a CDA project.

Discussion Questions

- How does the CDA framework's emphasis on a "we" relationship between researchers and communities reshape traditional power dynamics in participatory research? What implications might this have for ethical practice in social work?

- Thinking through the CDA phases, which phase attracts you most? Which feels like a stretch? How might attention to the Four Pathways to Justice support you and the ART in successfully implementing the CDA process and delivering results as a true call to action?

- How does dialogue influence the process and outcomes of social justice-oriented projects using CDA in social work practice? Consider specifically the role of dialogue in each of the CDA phases and offer suggestions for promoting it and overcoming anticipated challenges.

Student Assignment

Pre-Class Reading:

- Bailey, D., Spath, S., Walker, M., Adams, D., Butler, K., Chou, R.O., Mosley, M., & X, L. (2025, July 2). *Community dialogues for action with Neighbors Helping Neighbors on the Main Line (CDAs with NHN)*. Unpublished manuscript. Bryn Mawr College. https://www.brynmawr.edu/sites/default/files/media/documents/2025-08/CDAs%20with%20NHN%20final%20report.pdf

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- Social Justice Initiative website: https://www.brynmawr.edu/academics/centers-institutes-projects/social-justice-initiative

- Thurber, A. (2020). Cultural humility in community practice: Reflections from the Neighborhood Story Project. *Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping*, *26*(2), 75–88. https://reflectionsnarrativesofprofessionalhelping.org/index.php/Reflections/article/view/1744/1621

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Pre-Class Assignment:

Consider the following questions. Come prepared to discuss your thoughts in class. What does curiosity mean to you? How would you describe the relationship between curiosity and intentionality and their impact on research?

Class Assignment:

Reflect on your positionality as a "researcher" implementing CDA and consider the following questions. Present your learnings using a presentation vehicle that aligns with your style and understanding of the subject (e.g., paper, poetry, series of journal entries, oral presentation, sketchnoting/graphic recording, teaching video, skit/visual performance).

- In what ways can integrating Freire's concept of "epistemological curiosity" and Hurston's notion of "formalized curiosity" enhance your ability to co-create knowledge with communities?

- How can grounding in the Four Pathways to Justice – forgiveness, cultural humility, courage and compassion, and radical love – build your capacity to navigate the complexities of community-based work?

- Class Assignment (Alternative): Any of the Discussion Questions may be used in place of the questions in the assignment above.

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