



Canadian Journal of Nonprofit and Social Economy Research  
Revue canadienne de recherche sur les OBSL et l'économie sociale

Vol. 5, No. 2  
Autumn / Automne 2014  
pp. 90 – 92

## Book Review

By Jorge Sousa

**Learning and Teaching Community-Based Research: Linking Pedagogy to Practice.**  
*Edited by C. Etmanski, B.L Hall, & T. Dawson.* Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2014.  
416 pp. ISBN 9781442612570.

Community-based research (CBR) has gained considerable traction over the last 15 years. Once criticized for being irrelevant and lacking in rigour, CBR has increasingly become recognized as a powerful methodology for knowledge construction and dissemination. CBR has become widely accepted as possessing a rigour that some explain as being more authentic, and has attained deserved legitimacy in academia and in the world of community development. CBR is a political project that is aimed directly at critiquing the existing hegemony of what constitutes knowledge.

*Learning and Teaching Community-Based Research: Linking Pedagogy to Practice* is a series of accounts intended to help people understand the power of community-based research as a methodology at the intersection of teaching and learning. The editors carefully selected pieces in this volume that are appropriate for individuals participating in different community-based activities, including organizing, development and research, and more traditional disciplines like sociology, education and political science.

Before I begin this review I want to highlight the importance of the forward, written by Professor Martin Taylor, former Vice-President of Research at the University of Victoria. Taylor provides a heartfelt description of the efforts of faculty, students and community practitioners to bring recognition to the importance of CBR in a university context. While I believe these acknowledgments are important, the relationship between the city of Victoria, the University, and community-based practitioners as enablers of CBR needs to be explained, which is attempted in later chapters.

Including the introduction, the book has five sections and 16 chapters. Most of the authors locate themselves, both personally and politically within their text, which is an important characteristic of undertaking CBR. The editors use the introduction as a chance to provide essential context for the book. The overview is well laid out and gives the reader an elegant introduction to CBR. I particularly appreciated the listing of “terms and traditions associated with CBR” (p.7). These terms and traditions give the reader a good sense of the foundation of CBR while acknowledging that it is a contested terrain. Each of the sections describes different aspects of CBR intended to give the reader a broad understanding of topic. The sections are generally well balanced, containing up to four chapters in each that detail rich experiences of using CBR and reflections on its efficacy. In the first section, “Learning by Doing: Learning CBR through the Practice of CBR,” the chapters provide important insight on the structure of CBR. For instance, the importance of partnerships and agreements (chapter 1), and challenging inequitable practices associated with

90



To be notified about new ANSERJ articles, [subscribe here](#) / Afin d'être avisé des nouveaux articles dans ANSERJ, [s'inscrire ici](#).

research (chapter 2). The chapters in the second section, “Learning with Community: Teaching CBR in Community Settings,” provide examples of tools found in practice, such as training strategies (chapter 4), community mapping techniques (chapter 5), and considerations in facilitations (chapter 6). The section concludes with an interesting chapter by Budd Hall sharing how his experiences in participatory research have led him to embrace CBR as an important lens for community-oriented work.

As I read the first two sections I was eagerly waiting for an account of some tools that CBR proponents actually use in practice. I was partially satisfied with the content in the third section, “Campus Beyond the Classroom: Innovations in CBR Programming.” Each of the chapters in this section outline important and useful applications of pedagogical practices within specific contexts. The fourth section, “Promoting Knowledge Democracy: Teaching CBR in University Classrooms,” builds on the previous section by taking the reader through different scenarios where CBR is applied in learning settings.

The last two chapters in the final section, “Moving Forward: Productive Tensions and Persistent Challenges of Learning, Teaching, and Assessing CBR in Universities,” offer considerations for the reader as they consider a research path grounded in CBR. Chapter 15 is particularly important, because the editors summarize the content of the book thoroughly, linking themes across the chapters, and provide a set of questions for further thought. I was particularly struck by the questions “Who are the learners? Who are the teachers? Who is the community?” (p. 313). While the editors make an effort to explain each of the themes, responding to their questions could be the basis of a new volume. The book includes two appendices with useful resources and potential evaluative instruments. While the listing is limited, they can be helpful for those who are unfamiliar with CBR.

*Learning and Teaching* has many strong points. The chapters are clearly written by practitioners or academic researchers with a strong connection to the field who have decided to share their rich experiences with a broader audience. I am thankful for how clearly the authors expressed complex ideas in a very limited format with such an authentic tone. I am quite confident that the authors captured many of the crucial themes associated with CBR, like the importance of collaboration and the need to dismantle inequitable power structures between the researcher and the subject of the research, which are both integral to practicing authentic CBR.

I have struggled, however, with the notion that CBR can enhance one’s understanding of the reality faced in the community context. While I am generally supportive of this presumption, the challenge has been that such an understanding – or the acceptance of such an understanding – is built on what is considered important and crucial for universities and government policy makers. On that note, I find that a significant shortcoming of this book and the way in which CBR is described is the emphasis placed on the role of formal educational institutions as the principal means by which knowledge is constructed and legitimized.

While I feel the book is balanced in terms of chapters, I found there to be an imbalance associated with some of the content. It is certainly an asset that there was a substantial focus on indigenous studies and health related fields, which has been notoriously underrepresented in different scholarly contexts. However, the reader may mistakenly think that CBR is best accomplished in those settings, thereby limiting its applications to only specific communities. Moreover, the use of indigenous-led and indigenous-focused approaches to CBR implies a link or a synergy between the two, which was not addressed in this book.

An additional shortcoming is the focus on Victoria, British Columbia. With the exception of one author, the cases and content reflect experiences within Victoria. I understand the challenges of assembling an edited volume, but I

would have appreciated a thoughtful discussion of whether the editors see this as a potential limitation on how people perceive potential applications of CBR. While a small point of criticism about an otherwise outstanding book, it is nevertheless important for the reader to consider the socio-historical context from which the content is drawn. Finally, I feel a particular set of values (e.g., reciprocity, equity) were scattered throughout the chapters, and these values support CBR. All research work is value-laden, and we should celebrate this reality, but since our approach to learning is a reflection of those values, we need to critically reflect on this fact, which is something not included in this book.

In keeping with the approach taken by many of the authors in *Learning and Teaching*, I feel the need to position myself within the CBR community. I have been engaged in this type of research for almost 20 years, but I have always found there to be a poor slate of accounts that illuminate CBR-oriented research activities. Over the years, significant resources have been developed that explain CBR in practice, but a lack of context has kept the field of CBR on the fringes of academic research. While this book excels in using a typical academic lens, in this review I have tried to consider the content by appreciating the inherent value and rigor demonstrated by the authors. I believe this book provides an important foundation for future development of community-based research as an integral mindset for institutional and non-institutional researchers.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR / L'AUTEUR**

**Jorge Sousa** is Associate Professor in the Adult Education Specialization in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Alberta. Email: [sousa@ualberta.ca](mailto:sousa@ualberta.ca).