Book Review

Transforming Social Inquiry, Transforming Social Action: New Paradigms for Crossing the Theory/Practice Divide in Universities and Communities.


Senator John F. Kerry points out in his Foreword to this book that the way to bridge the theory–practice divide is not merely to interpret and report on circumstances of the real world, but rather, to deconstruct the separate and distinct communities that exist within our society through collaboration and partnerships. A place to begin multiple-sector collaboration in bridging theory and practice is through university–community partnerships in our schools. Throughout this book the authors relate how they interwove teaching and research, and created communities of inquiry through a variety of social experiments. All of the experiments took place at Boston College where the development of the six-school Center for Child, Family, and Community Partnerships and the two-school Leadership for Change Program, have engaged faculty and students in a series of cross–university-community projects that generated this book.

The editors, a lawyer and a Professor of Management, assembled colleagues from sociology, education, psychology, counseling and development, and community agencies to describe how they learned to practice new forms of social inquiry and social action to make science relevant and alive.

The editors set the stage for the book in Chapter 1 pointing out that university researchers who are bound within single disciplines and isolated from practice cannot develop relevant solutions to critical societal issues. “Wicked” real world problems exist in real time and require multidirectional transfer of knowledge across disciplines and between researchers and practitioners.

Chapter 2 describes the years of work needed to gain the trust of communities, based on experiences with researchers who used communities for “data raids.” Chapter 3 reflects on the challenges of successfully establishing
interdisciplinary centers at universities. How can research and practice interweave in a college or university setting? In Chapter 4 a sociologist imagines a scenario in which the faculty of Alpha Omega College in the Midwest participates in determining the fate of their own institution. Chapter 5 described a model of “doing” social science that researchers and practitioners can use in their own situations.

Chapter 6 describes a 7-year process in which scholars and practitioners participated in transforming a community school. The transformations that they experienced occurred around four key issues: articulating beliefs about change, defining “community,” linking scholarship and practice, and sustaining a commitment to work. Chapter 7 explores some of the sources of tension between lawyers and nonlawyers in collaborative settings. Chapter 8 focuses on the concept of social justice, and how tensions and contradictions in collaborative efforts to seek social justice played out in teaching and teaching education. Chapter 9 offers a dialogue of a small group of scholars/consultants who critique one another’s theories-in-practice. One of the more interesting chapters evaluates the successes and failures of service learning and how it can enhance the training of counseling psychologists for a broader role (Chapter 10). Chapter 11 describes a partnership among sociology and management faculty and business partners in creating a unique executive program called “Leadership for Change.” Chapter 12 describes how a law school clinic supports law students to create reflective practitioners.

Chapter 13 is a call to bridge knowledge and action and describes how a doctoral program at Boston College transformed itself toward this end. This final and especially useful chapter summarizes guidelines and ethical standards for research with human subjects. The authors point out that the relationship of current ethical guidelines in research with human subjects and actual practice remains unclear. Collaborative forms of inquiry blur the dynamic boundaries between research and practice. Several dilemmas raised by creative research designs encountered in participatory and action-oriented research are discussed.

Edited books involving a range of authors from different disciplines and with different writing styles present a challenge to editors in compiling a smooth and cohesive work, even when the authors focus on a common topic. Yet, the range of articles from the theoretical to the practical represents the “real world” of interdisciplinary collaboration. Some chapters will be more useful to readers than others, depending upon one’s discipline and degree of “appliedness.” Nonetheless, the Boston schools’ effort is a useful and brave pioneering effort in melding theory and practice to benefit communities. If we, as academics, are to make knowledge useful, we need to link with practitioners, and practitioners need to share their experiences with us if we academics are to build and modify theory. Indeed,