

Visit to the School of Social Work, UMSL 8 September – 19 September 2008

Purpose of visit

The purpose of my visit as outlined in my proposal of 2007, planned jointly with Prof L Pierce, was to teach participatory research to faculty and community of social work and to initiate a participatory research project with unemployed and estranged fathers living in the violent city centre of St Louis, served by a neighbourhood agency. The project with fathers was to potentially link with quantitative research already being carried out in an ongoing project in the same community.

Outcome of visit

I presented seven lectures, including a public lecture to the university and wider community on a range of topics with a South African focus (see attached timetable). Participatory research was taught to two student groups; one I followed up with a homework assignment which was discussed in the second week's class and the other is being followed up by the instructor in the form of class assignments. There was only one opportunity to address faculty and community social workers on participatory research which was insufficient to teach them skills which could be used independently. I met with researchers and practitioners in the community as well as discussing e-learning collaboration between UM and UWC (see timetable). Profs Pierce and Sable and I have agreed to pursue registration by UM students for modules in the UWC interdisciplinary online MA (Child and Family). The project with fathers could not be initiated because the neighbourhood agency did not recognise any potential for participatory research with the fathers and also the two teachers in charge of family care at the agency could not envisage their own role as researcher-facilitator which is the required role for a participatory approach. This means that I did not *gain entry* to the project, the first and most important step in participatory research.

In place of participatory research with the fathers whereby they would research their own experience and set up some action to change their situations, Prof Pierce and I decided to analyse the data already collected from the fathers in two focus groups and also present an argument regarding resistance to a follow-up participatory project. This could constitute a publishable article. We also planned a new research project – the issue of gender in teaching and in career path development. Research on this topic was carried out by Prof Pierce at UWC and I would do the same at UMSL to form a comparative research project. I consequently collected data from lecturers at UMSL in in-depth interviews and informal conversations for the remaining time that I had at the university.

Discussion

In hindsight it was naïve to expect to be able to bring participatory research knowledge and skills to an inexperienced (in this aspect) faculty and community practitioners to a level of independent competence. Firstly this was a one-off visit of two weeks, too short to start *and* follow up any skills. Conceivably, follow up could take place online but this presumes a very solid start. In this case we did not establish a solid start due to unavailability of faculty and community for the two-day workshop that we had originally planned. Secondly, the UMSL School of Social Work teaches

quantitative and not qualitative research which means that there is no existing foundation of knowledge for a participatory approach. Qualitative research, with in-depth interviews and insider perspective and a tendency towards inductive interpretation, lends itself to participatory research much better than deductive quantitative methods do, although quantitative methods, with questionnaires and pre-set measurement, might well be included as *a part* of a participatory project.

For the fathers' project, the professionals at the agency were teachers accustomed to an authoritative role and it is realistic of them to feel unable to perform the facilitative role required by participatory research even with assistance from the university. I understand and support their reluctance to taking this role themselves. There also appears to be a racial bias against white (Caucasian) data collectors in this African American community. These two factors might well be the cause of agency resistance to the project itself. We will need to find a specially trained African American outsider to conduct the project. Suitable people would be a master's student in social work doing a dissertation, or an experienced social worker from the community doing the work under supervision of a participatory researcher.

The data provided by the fathers in the preparatory focus groups organised by Prof Pierce points to a very real need for continued development and there are also signs that the fathers feel motivated to reflect and bring about change themselves. These attitudes make the group of fathers ripe for intervention therefore; we must not lose sight of the project whoever carries out the research. Recommendations for the project will be generated by analysis of the data by me. Data from the gender and women project will be analysed and might need to be supplemented as more time in St Louis was required to equal the purposive sample. Eleven lecturers were interviewed by Prof Pierce at UWC and only seven by me at UMSL.

Conclusion

I was introduced to the UMSL social work community and engaged in a very full programme of meeting colleagues and of teaching. My knowledge and experience of both participatory research and social policy was conveyed to the UMSL community, in formal lectures and in informal discussion and conversations. Data collection from two research projects will be analysed for the purpose of two research articles and for further planning of a neighbourhood project with fathers. The sources of potential e-learning collaboration between UWC and UMSL have been identified.

I would like to thank Profs Persens and Pierce and their administrative teams for arranging this overseas visit. Prof Pierce went far beyond the call of duty in overseeing my timetable. I was always occupied and seldom alone. Compared with previous American visits to academia, UMSL faculty and staff were unexpectedly friendly and helpful, students were responsive and asked pertinent questions, some of which I am still researching for their information.

Altogether this was a truly fruitful and affirming time.

K J Collins

29 September 2008

Schedule for Kathy Collins
Host, Lois Pierce, 314-516-6384, office
322-6262, cell

Arrive STL Friday, 5 Sept 10:50 am Delta 1635

Staying in Legras Hall, contact, Allyson Wilson 314.516.4399
Meet with Allyson, tour campus, show office

Saturday, tour St. Louis
Sunday, dinner, Pierce

Monday, 8 Sept

10:00-11:00 Meet with Pierce and Ramona Edwards, Normandy School District
1:00-2:00 Class - Johnson's undergraduate research course, participatory research
6:30-7:30 pm Class - Pierce's Program Evaluation course, master's level, participatory research

Tues, 9 Sept.

2:00-3:00 Roxanne Crawford, Dignity House, re: Father's Group

Wed., 10 Sept.

9:00-12:00 Lois and Kathy to discuss research projects
12:00-1:30 Lunch with Nancy Shields, re: Children and Violence, RSA
5:30-6:30 Class - Shirley's health policy course, master's level.

Thurs. 11 Sept

9.00 Research interviews re gender and women's career paths begin
3:00-4:30 Attend presentation on community violence
5:30-6:30, Class - Segal's Human Service Organizations course, graduate level on management in social service agencies in South Africa

Friday, 12 Sept.

8:45-11:45, Marjie Sable, re: UWC summer program

Monday 15 Sept.

4:00-5:00 Class - Saleeby's family policy course, graduate level, on South African family policy.
6.30-7:30 Class - Case analysis with Pierce's Program Evaluation course.

Tuesday 16 Sept.

Research interviews re women and gender career paths.

Wed., 17 Sept.

Research interviews continue

Thurs., 18 Sept.

1;30-3:30 Presentation on Participatory Research to academic and practitioner community.

Leave STL Friday 19 September 8:51