

## FULL-LENGTH ARTICLES

# Participatory Action Research as Pedagogy: Stay Messy

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In this paper, we reflect on the use of Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a pedagogy. To do so, we first introduce PAR and review the burgeoning literature discussing PAR as a pedagogical approach at the university level. We then provide vignettes of our independent experiences as college educators facilitating PAR within undergraduate classrooms. Through our stories, we engage with the messy space between our efforts to change unjust systems and the neoliberal constraints of the academy with a chokehold on those efforts. In this narrative reflection, we examine key themes across our experiences, including: 1) relationship development as a political act; 2) the importance of emergent and responsive pedagogy; and 3) the challenges associated with prefiguring democratic practices in the classroom. Altogether, this paper grapples with the value and risk of bringing PAR into university classrooms and urges PAR educators to refrain from tidying up their pedagogy.

### Introduction

There is a bright flame that burns fiercely within students when they realize their abilities as valued knowledge creators. It is this flame that transforms systems—including higher education and academia broadly—into radically inclusive spaces. Despite its challenges, this transformation potential is why we, as scholar-educators, use Participatory Action Research (PAR) in the classroom as an epistemology that informs pedagogy.

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Increasingly, PAR, rooted in radical and liberatory traditions, is being used in university settings in the U.S. and beyond (Lykes et al., 2018). PAR has been lifted up as an engaging and action-oriented way for people to participate in knowledge creation (i.e., as an epistemology), deep and relevant learning, sociopolitical development, and collective action (Lykes et al., 2018; Vaccarino-Ruiz et al., 2022). With all its potential, PAR has also been criticized when it appears watered-down, depoliticized, and taught as merely a method or through a checklist approach. (Fine & Torre, 2021; Peralta, 2017; Ritterbusch, 2019). PAR is particularly sensitive to co-optation in university settings because, while universities are sites of possibility and critical learning, they also reproduce and sometimes further entrench hierarchies and injustices. Therefore, university classrooms are fertile settings to interrogate the messy contours of liberatory education. In this paper, we highlight PAR not only as a research and activism framework, but as an effective pedagogical approach. We argue that PAR is most useful as a pedagogy when collaborative knowledge creation is centered, and learning and action remain politicized. We balance

this view with the perspective that process is just as important as outcomes (Denzin, 2009) and that a purity approach to PAR at the university level is unrealistic.

We first introduce PAR; then make a case for including undergraduate students in PAR as co-creators of knowledge; discuss various approaches of PAR; and then provide three examples of PAR in the classroom. Through our vignettes, we illustrate how we've engaged with the messy tensions between our desire to transform unjust systems and what is feasible within the academy. These narratives highlight key themes across our experiences, including: 1) relationship development as a political act; 2) the importance of emergent and responsive PAR pedagogy; and 3) the tension of enacting prefigurative politics, that is, embodying the future society we seek through relationships and democratic practices. It is our hope that this discussion and illustration of PAR as pedagogy can extend PAR theory and provide some guidance for educators interested in taking on these endeavors, while also leaving breathing room for the natural twists and turns (Guishard, 2009) — the messiness — of PAR.

### **What is Participatory Action Research?**

Participatory Action Research (PAR)<sup>1</sup> braids together critical, participatory, and action-oriented approaches to scholarship and activism. PAR has come into existence over the last 100 years, is rooted in various social movements throughout history, and spans many academic disciplines (see Torre et al., 2012, or Mirra et al., 2016, for thorough history). PAR is built on three main epistemological and ethical traditions: reframing issues of study from dominant models of post-positivism to a critical orientation (e.g., feminism, critical race theory, neo-Marxism); an enduring commitment to democratic decision-making and broad participation in research; and a responsibility to progressive change and action within research programs (Torre et al., 2012). PAR by definition is political because it de-centers the professionalized university-based knower, centers participant-researchers as experts, focuses on changing inequitable social/institutional structures, and reconfigures ideas about whom research is for and to whom the university-based professionalized researcher is accountable (Fine & Torre, 2021).

### **A Case for Meaningful Inclusion of Undergraduate Students in PAR**

Despite the democratic and inclusive aims of PAR, it appears that undergraduate university students are seldom invited to meaningfully participate as co-researchers in comparison to other community members (Greenwood, 2007; Trott et al., 2020). This is problematic because it limits students' exposure to PAR and reifies post-positivist and experimental research as the dominant academic frame. In turn, undergraduate students leave college

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<sup>1</sup> There has been a recent push to utilize the label Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) in response to the uptake of PAR in some academic circles that reify, rather than overturn, the status quo (Fine et al., 2021). We continue to use the term PAR here to trace the politically radical origins of PAR and also to surface the intentions versus realities of social transformation in PAR, particularly within university settings.

with these epistemological frameworks and associated methodological skills, which may inform the types of research they view as legitimate and go on to conduct in graduate school and beyond. By including undergraduate students in PAR, they can develop the competencies necessary to incorporate action-oriented and participatory frameworks into their own knowledge building and changemaking (Hammond et al., 2005; Kindon & Elwood, 2009). Some may contend that students can simply take a course that lectures on the components of PAR; however, it has been argued (e.g., Greenwood, 2007) that teaching both the *content* and the *form* of PAR in tandem produces the most robust learning and practical skills for students. For example, studies have documented that undergraduate PAR experiences have resulted in increased confidence to pursue future PAR, psychological empowerment, critical consciousness, sociopolitical development, effective collaboration, and leadership skills (Bywater, 2014; Fernández et al., 2018; Guy et al., 2020; Hammond et al., 2005; Mountz et al., 2008; Trott et al., 2020; Walker & Loots, 2018).

In addition to helping students develop PAR competencies that they can wield in future research programs, PAR projects with undergraduate students, particularly those embedded in coursework, can support the transformation of higher education from a site of student knowledge consumption to knowledge co-creation (Mountz et al., 2008; Walker & Loots, 2018). Over time, building knowledge together with students can create a culture shift in academia, where varied forms of knowledge — including student-produced knowledge — are embraced (Kindon & Elwood, 2009). Further, it creates an opportunity to pursue alternatives to neoliberal higher education that reify the status quo (Levin & Greenwood, 2008) by experimenting with and extending critical pedagogy (e.g., Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994).

Finally, a case can be made for community benefits stemming from the meaningful inclusion of undergraduates in PAR agendas. Within university communities, undergraduate students have been the backbone of institutional change (Biondi, 2012; Kendi, 2012). Undergraduate students also often have strong commitments and ties to their communities outside of the university (Mattern & Wyatt, 2009) and these anchors can be a valuable resource for forging and maintaining sustainable partnerships that effect change. Since the ultimate goal of PAR is to transform our societies to be more democratic, equitable, and just (Torre et al., 2012), it stands to reason that undergraduate students embedded in their own communities could make important contributions to this aim.

### **Various PAR Pedagogy Approaches**

Academics who facilitate participatory and action-oriented research with undergraduate students span a variety of disciplines, including social and community psychology (e.g., Thomas et al., 2019); education (e.g., López et al., 2020); social work (e.g., McNicoll, 1999); gender studies (e.g., Catlett & Beck, 2007); anthropology (e.g., Elvemo et al., 1997); environmental sociology (e.g., Bywater, 2014); geography (e.g., Pain et al., 2013); and interdisciplinary

studies (e.g., Mountz et al., 2008). Educators have taken various approaches to infusing PAR pedagogy in their work with undergraduate students, with differences regarding the context, container, team configurations, and participatory nature of the PAR projects. Some have facilitated PAR with undergraduates within formal courses, also called course-based PAR. Students' participation in these projects usually spans the one or two terms that they receive course credit (e.g., Bywater, 2014). In contrast, PAR projects that are developed and executed outside of formal courses, through independent studies or not affiliated with course credit at all, typically involve a more fluid timeline of student participation than in course-based PAR. For example, Fernández and colleagues' (2018) PAR collective was organically formed among four student activists, one professor, and one staff member and persisted for several years (Fernández, personal communication, September 5, 2022).

Those who do conduct course-based PAR must make decisions pertaining to the container of the PAR projects and configurations of the community partnerships. Some course-based PAR projects are contained within the course (e.g., Bywater, 2014). Students who participate in course-based PAR projects that conclude at the end of their course get exposure to several stages of the research process, but their projects may be limited in scope due to time constraints. In contrast, other projects are structured in an ongoing fashion, such that new students pick up where the previous term has left off, exposing them only to the current stage of the ongoing research process (e.g., Catlett & Beck, 2007). Students participating in ongoing PAR projects may not experience the same kind of ownership over the project, but contribute to more robust projects and organizing efforts.

Instructors have also detailed a variety of configurations for pairing student-researchers with community partners. For example, Hammond and colleagues (2005) facilitated several terms of course-based PAR in which each student partnered with their own community organization. Whereas Mountz and colleagues (2008) divided students into five research teams, each with their own community partner. In both configurations, student-researchers collaborate with non-academic community members or organizations, but the latter emphasizes intensive teamwork amongst peers in the course as well.

Finally, PAR with undergraduates varies widely with regard to who decides the topic, also known as *problem definition*. On one end of the spectrum, students and faculty co-determine the problem (e.g., Fernández et al., 2018). On the other end of the spectrum, students enter the course with a previously defined topic of inquiry determined by the instructor (e.g., Bywater, 2014). Midway between these poles is Mountz and colleagues' (2008) model, where the instructors determined the five community partnerships, and then the students collaborated with those partners to determine the specific project. Notably, student-researchers' role in problem definition is influenced by the context and the container of the PAR project. In other words, projects outside of formal courses or ongoing within courses are not bound by the same time

constraints as course-based PAR contained in one course. For instructors who facilitate contained course-based PAR, defining the problem beforehand prioritizes other stages of the research and action, as well as increases the likelihood that students will share a common interest coming into the course. The sacrifice, of course, is the experience of engaging in democratic processes to choose a topic most meaningful to the entire group.

Despite the variety of PAR pedagogical approaches, undergraduate students engaged in PAR have opportunities to co-create knowledge, execute social action, and — to varying degrees — are empowered to guide the research program. Given the increasing popularity of PAR within the university sphere, some PAR facilitators have recently cautioned university professors against the co-optation or de-politicization of PAR as it is squeezed into the confines of university classrooms (e.g., Ritterbusch, 2019). As such, we outline the challenges that can arise when PAR is used as a pedagogy in this setting.

### **Warnings for PAR Facilitators in University Settings**

When working with students in a university context, a de-politicized PAR may take shape as an intertwined approach to learning and research that is primarily concerned with student outcomes (e.g., course credit, mastery of research methods, experience with community partners, etc.) and less concerned with implementing and sustaining multilevel change. In this “toolkit approach” (Ritterbusch, 2019, p. 1303), PAR is simplified into a series of concrete steps for students to memorize and follow. Participatory geographer Amy Ritterbusch (2019) distinguished “committed, deeper PAR pedagogies” (p. 1303) from “lite pedagogies,” which she defined as “watered-down, university-permissible, PAR pedagogies and research practices” that can “stunt the growth of meaningful relationships that fuel social justice movements” (p. 1297). Despite the radical intention of some PAR facilitators, the many constraints of the university context, such as the “rhythm of the academic year,” the “safety/liability issues universities face,” (p. 1305), and “university-based measures of productivity” (p. 1309), threaten the integrity of PAR and lead to lite pedagogies.

As Ritterbusch (2019) outlined in the recounting of her experiences as an educator and Participatory Action Researcher in Bogota, the rhythm of the academic year does not align with the time involved in working with communities and creating sustainable social change. Small-scale projects that are limited to academic terms and are overly concerned with avoiding liability often lack impact. While these projects tend to benefit students academically, students matriculate and the target of the research (i.e., the community problem or the unjust structure of the university) remains unchanged (Greenwood, 2007).

Further, the neoliberal structures of academia emphasize efficiency over relationship-building and serve to maintain the status quo of inequity (Sleeter, 2014). This emphasis may create: 1) increased pressures on faculty to be “productive”; 2) increased competition for external and internal research funding; and, for some of us, 3) diminished public funding that influences all

aspects of our work, including the number of students in classrooms and the expectations of students who are now shouldering a higher burden of (debt to pay for) tuition (Mirra & Rogers, 2016). Increasingly, in addition to debt, students are often taking on paid work to support themselves and/or their families while engaging in higher education, further limiting student capacity to form committed relationships with community partners. Together, these constraints often result in “parachut[ing]...in and out of communities in [our] university backyards” (Ritterbusch, 2019, p. 1302), rather than building the long-term community partnerships needed for catalyzing systemic change.

While Ritterbusch (2019) surfaces important challenges that educators need to consider when developing PAR projects at the university level, we believe that framing PAR pedagogy as either “committed, deeper” or “lite” creates an unnecessary and limiting binary and ultimately implies an unattainable, purist approach to PAR. Indeed, there are many ways to co-opt radical pedagogies under the pressures of the neoliberal academy. Nevertheless, we argue that PAR pedagogy within university contexts can facilitate deep learning for students while also maintaining integrity with PAR as a radical process precisely because it provides a container to navigate and address such contradictions. For example, PAR brings together researchers with varied access to resources and power that can be productive for inquiry and action. In course-based PAR, power differentials between the faculty and the students can produce tensions that are important to interrogate and act upon (Fine & Torre, 2021). Institutions are difficult to change, but as PAR practitioners committed to learning and social change, we believe we still have to try to transform the university, even if failure is inevitable. In our view, we should attempt to foster systems change, acknowledge its difficulty, and put forth the educational value of learning that systems do not change easily.

Where does this scholarship leave us, as participatory and action-oriented researchers and educators? While we believe upholding a purist approach to PAR is limiting and have suggested that the contradictions of PAR can be fruitful, we do acknowledge that a toolkit or checklist approach can become de-politicized. Therefore, we collectively sought to understand whether and how course-based PAR could overcome the pressure of lite pedagogies. To do so, the three of us, who independently facilitated course-based PAR at three universities, engaged in monthly conversations for more than a year, discussing our experiences as educators, researchers, and accomplices in social justice. The messiness and beauty of course-based PAR echoed in these conversations. What follows was borne out of our collective and individual reflections on the value and risk of bringing PAR into university classrooms.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> While the topic and outcomes of students' PAR projects are mentioned in these vignettes, the focus is on the process of PAR as a pedagogy. For more in-depth discussions of the projects, see Coleman, in revision; Dancis, 2022; Ellison, in preparation.

## Vignettes of PAR Pedagogy in Action

### Vignette 1: Building Community Among Transfer Students

In fall 2017, two transfer students at California State University, Sacramento, asked me (Erin) for help: they wanted resources and to build a sense of community. Through this discussion, I shared what might be possible through a PAR paradigm, and we collaboratively defined the focus of the PAR project. By spring 2018, I had recruited a small research team to engage in a literature review and preliminary focus group research after undergoing human subjects ethics review. The students' lived experiences were supported by the literature and our collective analysis of the focus group data. Transfer students face challenges to academic and social adjustment when they transfer from a community college to a four-year university, and indeed transfer students could benefit from developing a sense of community in their new context (Townley et al., 2013). Moreover, the qualitative analysis of the focus groups (done primarily by students with my support) suggested that transfer students wanted to build community on campus, but the ways the institution engaged in community-building with new first-year students was inappropriate and inaccessible to transfer students. This led us to an additional research focus: by fall 2018, a PAR project was underway to examine transfer students' experiences and how to best support a sense of community among them.

The PAR project utilized Photovoice, a participatory method in which participants take photographs, analyze them, and collectively produce knowledge about their own experience (Langhout, Fernández, et al., 2016; Wang & Burris, 1997). To meet academic requirements, photography and dialogue were paired with writing, resulting in 39 photographs and essays from eight participants. In a subsequent semester, the essays were used as textual data and analyzed by a group of returning and new PAR students via thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this project, transfer students created knowledge about their own experiences of being a transfer student and that of their fellow participant-researchers.

The model for this PAR program was influenced by multiple frameworks, including a narrative approach to empowerment in which community and personal narratives are important psychological resources (Rappaport, 1995); *conscientization*, understood as people coming together to share stories about their struggles and concerns facilitating a systemic analysis rather than internalization of oppression, which is also associated with collective action and reflection (Freire, 1970); and desire-based frameworks, which suggest that social science researchers focus on the desires and not objectify the pain of marginalized communities with whom we work (Tuck, 2009).

The project took place in the context of a large psychology department in which student engagement in research is highly valued and there are independent study mechanisms to support their participation. Due to this arrangement, and the significant investment of labor to support undergraduate student research, it is ideal to recruit students who can participate in the

research “lab” for multiple semesters. Thus, when I started the project, one of the students who initially approached me and I recruited a team of students, through my classes and student organizations, with hopes that some could work on the project for a few semesters. This original team helped to design, conduct, and present the preliminary focus group research and then became a “leadership team” within the research lab. Although I designed the basic container for the class with objectives and techniques I used in other PAR projects, the leadership team contributed significantly to the course design and implementation. When the PAR/Photovoice process started, the leadership team played a more traditional researcher role in that they (with heavy support from me) designed the lesson plans, facilitated meetings, and collected ethnographic data about the process. The leadership team also served as a resource for the other students, which enhanced and prepared newer students to help co-create the relational environment of support. One class feature in particular, rooted in feminist pedagogy, set the tone for this environment: we started every meeting with a check-in to share how we were feeling, what was going on in our lives outside and inside of academics, and bear witness to each other as whole people (Langhout, Ellison, et al., 2016).

The original leadership team, although they also were mostly transfer students, did not participate in the Photovoice creation themselves (i.e., they did not take photos or write essays), but they facilitated the discussion using the SHOWeD method, a way of collectively, systematically, and discursively examining the experiences that the photos represent and how they connect to power inequities (Langhout, Fernández, et al., 2016; Wang & Burris, 1997). Transfer students in the U.S. are more likely to be BIPOC and lower-income than their first-year counterparts, and thus racism and classism, as well as family expectations, were often intertwined with their experiences as transfer students (Jain et al., 2020). Students had these conversations prior to writing the essays as a way to help them think through the meaning they wanted to make out of their visuals. During these moments there were often tears shed, other strong emotions, and lots of peer support.

We spent one semester (fall 2018) taking the photos and writing essays with eight transfer student researchers/photographers/writers. Some students in that cohort graduated or moved on, but roughly half stayed on, graduating to a course code that implied more responsibility and challenge. Returners would move into a leadership role and help new students get acclimated to our work. In the next semester (spring 2019), we began to analyze the textual data created through the photo essays. The leaders helped facilitate discussions about readings related to PAR, photovoice, and qualitative data analysis. The qualitative data analysis continued over multiple semesters, with seasoned “lab” students moving into leadership roles, training new students, and orienting them to the culture of the group.

The trajectory of the PAR cycle was disrupted by the pandemic in spring of 2020; at this point, we would have moved into the action phase, using the results of our analyses to take action ourselves and suggest (or demand)



institutional changes and programs to support transfer students. Typically in Photovoice, participants discuss how experiences represented are linked to power structures, and through the process develop social connection and an understanding of issues facing their community in order to take action upon those issues (Langhout, Fernández, et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2000). To align with a deeper PAR, rather than a de-politicized “lite” PAR, our actions would have attempted to hold university leaders accountable for responding to student needs. Instead of planning actions and confrontations, we spent our meetings on Zoom checking in (Langhout, Ellison, et al., 2016) and providing emotional support for each other in light of our experiences at the height of the pandemic, which included family loss, housing insecurity, loss of income, and isolation. We had lost momentum on campus, making the results of our work more palatable to the neoliberal university, but the relational environment persisted virtually.

Although this PAR process elided the tensions that politicized PAR within the university setting often garners, I believe it was still worthwhile and worth sharing for future PAR instructors. The container for this project was useful: I created the project like a class, and therefore students were not just accountable to each other, as we try to foster in any research team, but they were also accountable to get the work done for their grade. Although it further inscribed a power asymmetry with the instructor having the power to influence grades, the course structure and rubrics helped students understand the expectations of their work as it was outlined in a syllabus and structured in an online learning management system (i.e., Canvas). Many students (especially first-generation and underrepresented students) appreciate this structure because it clarifies a potential hidden curriculum about what is expected (Giroux & Penna, 1979). Student leaders also assisted in making norms and expectations visible.

Another benefit was the increasing responsibility that students received as they engaged in subsequent semesters with the team. I was able to see the professionalism, analytical skills, public speaking skills, critical thinking skills, and insight continually increase when students were able to stay with the team for multiple semesters. Additionally, I developed lasting relationships with the students, and they built relationships among themselves, thereby developing the relational skills important in many settings outside of the classroom.

Nevertheless, turnover was the main drawback of doing a PAR project as a part of a course. The course ends, and students do, and sometimes *must*, move on. It is a challenge to develop skills among students when you know they might be gone in a few months. Along with this turnover is momentum — when new students came in, onboarding to ensure they did not feel lost or behind returners was important and took time. This disrupted what I view as an ideal progression of the PAR cycle (i.e., more quickly moving to the action phase). Finally, especially during the Photovoice process, the very first leadership team did not get a chance to create photos and essay data regarding their own experiences. They had significant responsibility for facilitating the

group, so it would have been too much work, but looking back and discussing the project (and doing interviews with them), it is a regret that they did not participate in creating that knowledge about their own experiences.

The other main drawback was the situation influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. We did not take action, at least not in the narrower sense. Although we invited university administration officials to attend our exhibits and presentations, only faculty and student success staff attended, and the pandemic happened right as we would have moved into the phase where, based on our analyses, we would have proposed some kind of action (e.g., recommend policy change, organize for increased access to resources, etc.). Yet because there was a heavy focus on creating connections, building relationships, and developing a sense of community, our action included building the relational environment. Aligned with recent conceptions of mutual aid, a focus on relationship-building is important to movements for social justice because it helps those facing conditions of inequality and/or lack of access to resources survive the current context, situates political action within a framework of authentic care, and prefigures a society desired by those organizing (brown, 2017; Spade, 2020). Indeed, building caring relationships has always been a part of social movements, yet it has been “narrated out” of that history (Spade, 2020). Although we did not see material systems change, in our relatively short timeframe we built survival capacity, focused on the desires of transfer students, and remained politicized in our work through relationships. In this way, we engaged in deep, authentic, and politicized PAR.

### **Vignette 2: Interrogating University Responses to Sexual Assault**

My (Brett) PAR class was grounded in dialogue with students that preceded the class itself. I was faculty in the Human Services program at a large public university in the northwest United States. Students who took my PAR-based class were predominantly White women with liberal political leanings. However, the Human Services program was more diverse than the general university student body, 30 to 40 percent of my students were BIPOC, many were first-generation and/or transfer students, older students, and many worked full- or part-time jobs and cared for children. Many of our students were dissatisfied with the “traditional” class structure and wanted to do more “hands-on” systems change work in the context of training for a human services career. They pointed out to me the obvious contradiction of being in a program that described itself in terms of social justice and systems change in which those things were mainly just talked about and rarely acted upon. Students who were fortunate enough to be placed in an internship that involved real collaboration and community action were able to go beyond idle talk, but this was not a given and the program rarely put its stated values into active practice. Having already had experience with PAR for my dissertation research and being on the lookout for opportunities to implement PAR (or something like it) in the classes I was teaching, the scene was set for this kind of productive dialogue that led to the formation of the class.

It helped that the culture of the program was such that this kind of dialogue — with students, about the nature of the program and their critiques of it — was not uncommon. The dialogue I had with students that eventually led to forming the PAR-based class could be framed as “intersubjective engagement” (Lévinas, 1969; Peralta, 2017) in that we arrived at similar conclusions from different perspectives, and in doing so, identified and responded to a collective responsibility we all shared to put our money where our mouths were in the context of training human service workers as agents of social change. While this may have contributed to the “trueness” of the PAR processes we eventually engaged in, it is also true that the pedagogy was “litened” at the outset by the fact that I designed the course with no other input from students other than those general discussions about their desire to do something “real” in the context of their education and training. I could have (and perhaps should have) engaged students more in the design of the class, but, at the time, the pressures of my other responsibilities made it so that designing the class on my own (building in significant opportunities for student engagement to the course structure) was just the more efficient and, therefore, attractive option. However, I was conscious of the fact that a class grounded in PAR would be “permissible” by the university given that the institution put a high premium on community engagement, or at least it claimed it did. In planning the course, I had every intention of testing the limits of that permissibility.

The course in which I implemented a PAR approach was part of the core curriculum in the program and was aimed at infusing a systems-change perspective into training for work in human services fields. Based on the critical discussions with students, I reimagined the class as an ongoing PAR project that would be handed from one class to another over successive quarters. Over the two years that I ran the class, I sought to integrate collective inquiry and socio-political action (Fals Borda, 1988). While the basic structure of the class (based on what might be called a generic praxis model for PAR) was determined by me, at the very beginning of the first class we engaged in collective inquiry by brainstorming issues and problems the students wanted to address. Students voted on the possible issues, and we settled on the university’s response to sexual assault as the subject of the project we’d develop. Being a cisgendered, heterosexual male faculty in a program that had predominantly women students, I experienced some unease with the topic but felt that the imperative to base the project on students’ interests, concerns, and lived experience outweighed any hesitation on my part. And sharing my discomfort with the students went a long way in establishing the kind of trust and openness necessary for collective knowledge production. While it didn’t prove to be too large an obstacle, some students reported misgivings about the topic, including those who had experienced sexual assault in the past. At the beginning of every quarter, I discussed the sensitive nature of the topic with the incoming students and the potential for engagement with the topic through PAR to be empowering of victims of sexual assault. Indeed, two students later

reported to me that they experienced exactly that. They felt less victimized and had a greater sense of efficacy to confront the issue of sexual assault as a result of being in the class.

Beginning that first quarter, we grounded the project in students' collective knowledge of the subject drawn from their lived experiences. Discussions of what was known and assumed about the university's response to sexual assault brought to light many questions, which led to collecting and analyzing data from various sources to get a fuller understanding of the problem beyond our existing understandings and assumptions. These processes were intermingled with educational practices like lectures, readings, student-led, in-class discussions, collaborative quizzes, and writing assignments. These more "traditional" educational practices were meant to contextualize and situate the collective knowledge production we were engaged with and had the added benefit of justifying the class as something that could still meet traditional educational and training goals, which I felt would provide some cover should the "permissibility" of the class ever be questioned (it never was). The assignments also helped to build institutional knowledge that could be passed on from one class to another over successive quarters.

Many of the activities associated with the ongoing PAR project involved students questioning, challenging, and sometimes confronting university authorities and policies. Some of the activities involved organizing other stakeholders (students, faculty, administration) for actions ranging from popular education to policy and practice change. Towards the end of the two-year run of the class, we had established collaborative relationships with other campus-based stakeholders interested in addressing the issue of sexual assault and managed to facilitate some modest changes (e.g., an improved resource website, getting faculty to agree to place a disclaimer about sexual assault on their syllabi). And we were well on our way to fomenting a real campus-based movement that could significantly change things for the better had the class not come to an end due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the instructor of the class, I perhaps saw the "trueness" of the PAR process we engaged in and overlooked the "liteness" that was also there. Ritterbusch (2019) contends that a short-term, toolkit approach to PAR stunts its capacity to promote social justice through relationship formation. While I don't think this description accurately describes my class in the main, some aspects of her point are relevant here. Specifically, the student experience in the class would have been largely short-term. With the exception of a few students who continued working with the class in the context of an independent study or internship, most students only participated in the PAR project for one quarter. An apt criticism, I think, is that one quarter is not nearly enough for meaningful engagement that leads reliably to any sort of transformation of the student or the systems they were intervening in. Several students did report significant shifts in the way they thought about human service work as promoting social change. To the extent that such shifts resulted in them pursuing this kind of work post-graduation, it could be argued that some

at least personal transformation occurred. But it is just as likely that the excitement and novelty of the class wore off shortly after it was over, and the realities of working in the field may have blunted their enthusiasm for systems-change work. But I would also argue that coming away from the class with at least some increase in their efficacy at organizing colleagues and clients and critiquing (if not intervening in) systems and structures is a small victory that justifies the approach I took.

PAR scholars insist that it is more of a way of life than a research method (Ritterbusch, 2019) and that it exists in a tension with the academy's outcome orientation. One manifestation of this tension is that the typical academic career trajectory doesn't accommodate long-term community engagement very well. In my case, this tension played out because the desire for a better career fit outweighed my commitment to the community the PAR project was engaged with (in this case, the university community). Having already been shut down by the pandemic, the momentum of that commitment had been significantly hampered, and the project had not reached a level at which it could sustain itself in my absence. This speaks to the power of outside pressures (i.e., a global pandemic) intermingling with internal and personal pressures to derail the possibility of true engagement in the context of the college classroom. The question is whether the enlightening experience for students (who may very well be better prepared to engage in systems change as a result of the class) justifies the lack of true engagement inherent to classroom-based PAR.

### **Vignette 3: Disrupting University-Based Systemic Racism through Action Research**

The course-based PAR that I (Julia) taught as part of my dissertation work was housed within an established two-term community psychology capstone in the University Studies department at Portland State University. Due to the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic, I prepared an entirely remote capstone. I chose the theme of the capstone prior to the start of the course: Disrupting Systemic Racism at our University (for more on the process of choosing a theme, see Dancis, in revision). Prior to the start, I also sought out and formed partnerships with five campus partners so that students could spend more time planning and executing the action research, rather than brokering relationships themselves. In a sense, I prioritized the experience of designing and executing research over developing the skills of finding and forming partnerships.

Students in the course were diverse in their ethnicity/race, gender, sexuality, age, and transfer status. Most students reported time-consuming responsibilities in addition to the course, including part- or full-time work and caretaking. Additionally, students reported that the sociohistorical context of a global pandemic and uprisings against state-sanctioned, anti-Black violence impacted their financial stability, mental health, and academic motivation. By no means was this an average group of students or normal circumstances; and yet, over the course of 20 weeks, students investigated structural manifestations of racism, grappled with privilege and complicity, learned to design and carry

out mixed-method research, and utilized research to intervene on the topic of systemic racism at our university. We spent the first five weeks of the course investigating the systemic nature of racism and the framework of PAR, while also building a learning community. I created a Discord server<sup>3</sup>, an online social platform where students connected with each other to discuss the readings, shared information about antiracism events in Portland, provided advice on their graduate school applications, and exchanged pet photos. I also held optional virtual movie nights, where we watched films like *Sorry to Bother You* and informally discussed how systems of oppression functioned to reinforce each other. Over the next five weeks, students designed a research plan and presented proposals to the class for feedback. While an IRB representative informed me that IRB approval was not necessary for course projects that did not disseminate results beyond the course, two of the five research teams decided to submit for IRB approval in order to present their findings in research arenas. Students spent the second term (10 weeks) collecting and analyzing data, designing and executing social action, and presenting their work in a public showcase to a virtual room of 61 professors, university decision-makers, friends, and family. To give an illustration of the projects, one team partnered with an antiracism committee of academic advisors on campus to support Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) who were transferring to our university. The team surveyed both current and prospective BIPOC transfer students and held focus groups to understand barriers to successfully transitioning to and graduating from PSU. Using their data, they made several recommendations to academic advisors about how to improve advising for BIPOC transfers. They also created a campus resource map tailored to the needs of BIPOC transfer students, which is now handed out at transfer student orientations. During the university's transfer week, six months after the close of the course, two team members coordinated and facilitated a BIPOC transfer student panel, where they paid four participants from their study to offer wisdom to new transfers. These two students then went on to present their findings at three research conferences (for more details about their undergraduate research experience, see Freeman et al., in preparation).

The design and execution of action research projects in just six months, by students who had never designed nor executed action research, constrained the possibilities for transformation. Moreover, within this six-month time frame, action research teams experienced unforeseen barriers that delayed their research by one to as many as five weeks, including waiting for IRB approval, waiting on grant funds to support recruitment efforts, and the evolving needs of campus partners. Due to these delays, most teams were pressed to analyze their data in a few weeks and then quickly create an action plan. I believe the tight timelines and stress precipitated enormous growth and, in a way,

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<sup>3</sup> See <https://discord.com/> for more information about Discord.

helped facilitate a tight-knit learning community because it forced students to communicate openly with one another, keep their eyes on the big picture, and produce results. However, in some cases these circumstances had the opposite effect. Students expressed that incredibly tight deadlines, paired with unforeseen team tasks, heightened the team stress, incited conflict, and limited time for necessary revision and thoughtful decision making — all potentially stunting the effectiveness of their social action.

To enhance the ethos of democracy in the classroom, amongst other ethical and pedagogical reasons (Reitenauer, 2019), I opted to use self-grading for course assessment. Namely, as the instructor I did not allocate points to certain assignments, nor did I reduce my evaluations of student work down to letter grades. Instead, a core feature of my pedagogy was facilitating students' reflections of their own contributions to the course, their mastery of the material, and their growth over time, which they themselves translated into a letter grade each term. I received feedback from students that the self-grading structure encouraged them to contribute to the PAR projects in ways that were authentic to them and shifted the power dynamic such that they felt more comfortable disagreeing with the instructor (me) since they had control over their own grades.

Emphasizing democratic processes and student decision-making was not without complications, particularly given that our community had varying degrees of experiential and theoretical knowledge of systemic racism. As an instructor, I gave action research teams a lot of latitude in the spirit of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) and PAR (Fine et al., 2021). In retrospect, this came at the expense of learning by burning — learning lessons through the consequences of one's mistakes. While this might be an effective learning strategy for students, it ignores the material ramifications for BIPOC community members downstream of the action research projects. I intervened several times, which constrained students' power, prioritizing outcomes over process. There were also times that I did not intervene, either intentionally or because I was not privy to all aspects of each project. This tension between student ownership and effective antiracism action was complicated by my identity as a white instructor. My awareness of my identity as an outsider teaching a course to students across racialized categories led me to continuously interrogate my positionality in relation to my content expertise (Goldstein, 2021). Upon reflection, I realize I was much more comfortable intervening in strategies and actions that I disagreed with for white students but was less comfortable intervening with BIPOC students' plans. In a few instances of ambiguous paths forward, I deferred to BIPOC students' authority on decision making surrounding the design of their social action efforts. While these were my attempts to embody cultural humility (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998), it brings up complex power dynamics between outsider educators and insider students (Goldstein, 2021) that should be further examined.

These dynamics surface Táíwò's (2020) warning against what he calls epistemic deference, or deferring to people who have marginalized identities simply because of those identities. Underlying this warning is the acknowledgment that there is already a blinding privilege in being in the room (in this case, enrolled in college), which creates questions around who is really being represented and whose voice is being excluded. Táíwò contends that working-class issues and radical thinkers are often silenced at ostensibly diverse decision-making tables. These optics of inclusion result in widely adopted policies that further oppress minoritized, working-class communities. A natural release valve for these challenges is to promote BIPOC instructors with working-class interests teaching or co-teaching future course-based, antiracism PAR. Diversifying faculty on a large scale, particularly in the Pacific Northwest (PNW), would require robust recruitment and retention efforts that would need to address issues related to policy and city planning to make the PNW a more hospitable place for BIPOC families to live (e.g., Dumas, 2016; Gibson, 2007). These initiatives must be paired with structural efforts to expand the pool of working-class academics of color, which has been constrained by marginalization and academic pushout at every level of education (Adair & Dahlberg, 2009; Dumas, 2016; la paperson, 2017; Weis & Fine, 2012). For white instructors, grappling with the tension between cultural humility and epistemic deference should be a priority, which speaks to the necessity of white educators seeking out ongoing antiracism education, accountability circles, and professional development that do not further burden their BIPOC colleagues (Smith et al., 2017). All of these recommendations for pedagogy and policy are guided by the central aim of course-based PAR — social transformation and liberation.

### Discussion

The vignettes above by no means cover the vast and varied terrain of PAR with undergraduate students, but they illustrate the configurations we chose, and the unique opportunities and challenges associated with them (and with PAR pedagogy in general). As we processed our own experiences with PAR pedagogy, we found shared lessons that took on new meanings when discussed collectively. In this section, we offer three main takeaways to carry into future PAR pedagogical endeavors: 1) Relationships are central and are political acts in themselves; 2) Emergent and responsive pedagogy, in the form of PAR pedagogy, makes education matter to students' lives and pushes back against neoliberal, consumerist models of education; and 3) Prefiguring our worlds within the university classroom will always be messy and fraught with complications.

#### Relationships are Political Acts

We understand Ritterbusch's (2019) critiques of course-based PAR that primarily focus on the student experience while ignoring institutional change. And yet, the connections we fostered with our students felt bigger than simply enhancing academic engagement. We wrote them letters of recommendation



for graduate school, mentored them through academic conferences and manuscripts, attended their graduation parties, brought them COVID-19 care packages, called them in rehab, and shared many meals together. We agreed that our commitment to our students was ongoing and extended beyond the bookends of our courses and that this commitment was core, rather than in addition, to our PAR approaches.

While it is well established that relationships facilitate and deepen student learning (hooks, 1994; Lichty & Palamaro-Munsell, 2017; Wenger, 1998), the university context often discourages instructors (e.g., through tenure requirements) from putting in the time to develop relationships with their students and create learning communities. Students benefit from building relationships with peers (Christens, 2012; Townley et al., 2013), yet course features such as lecture formats and high-stakes assessments, as well as personal responsibilities outside of the university such as employment or family duties, can be obstacles to peer relationship development, especially on commuter campuses. It is within these university constraints that building authentic relationships with students, and supporting peer relationships, becomes a political act, as it pushes back against alienation derived from moving through the neoliberal and increasingly assembly-line experience of undergraduate education (Sleeter, 2014; Spade, 2020). This perspective reframes what could be seen as failed PAR projects due to curtailed action pieces (e.g., from COVID-19-induced stay-at-home orders or the end of courses) to a successful restructuring of knowledge-building and academic relationships. To the extent that PAR projects in the college classroom facilitate practice with democratic processes, interactions with diverse individuals and publics, and the explicit centering of social justice in the curriculum, they can be considered successful at the level of educational outcomes, even if the projects themselves produce no change (Gurin et al., 2002; Sleeter, 2014).

Although Ritterbusch (2019) understandably critiques course-based PAR that swaps out enduring community partnerships for a positive student experience, we argue that both can be achieved when the university itself is framed as its *own* community in need of transformation. All three of our PAR projects targeted our own university cultures, policies, and procedures, rather than reaching outside of the university to create change. This decision not only worked to strengthen the university community but also avoided the exploitative relationships with non-university community partnerships that Ritterbusch (2019) cautioned against. We collectively wondered what kinds of non-university community partnerships could successfully support the ongoing relationships necessary to enact PAR with integrity and put forth the possibility of students working with communities or community organizations that they had independent relationships with prior to the projects. Of course, this might limit which students could participate in these experiences. More discussion is needed around how to form ethical, non-university partnerships within course-based PAR.

## Emergent Pedagogy Makes Education Matter

Each of our courses were born in response to student dissatisfaction and desire. Whether the students expressed the need for specific university supports (i.e., resources for transfer students) or a wish for more relevant, hands-on education (e.g., skills to help disrupt systemic racism), we listened to their calls and sought to create education that directly *mattered* to them (Vianna & Stetsenko, 2019). One feature of centering PAR in pedagogical decisions is that students get to engage in knowledge-building practices on topics most important to them, as power-sharing is a core tenet of PAR. Students not only gained skills related to designing and conducting research, but also learned how to respond to issues they cared about.

In our post-mortem conversations, we surfaced the shared observation that engaging with sensitive and relevant topics (e.g., sexual assault), while daunting for students, shifted their role from that of an isolated victim or helpless witness to empowered citizens in community with one another. The emergent instructional topics and practices that unfolded in collaboration with students seemed to further change the nature and climate of the university away from alienation and towards liberation. That being said, we should not expect PAR to be a panacea (Guishard, 2009). The hegemonic influence of neoliberal ideology will show up in the PAR-oriented classroom, too. Students may hesitate or resist working within a group; or they may be worn down by having to work and/or care for a family, in addition to their schooling. Professors may, appropriately or not, fall back on the power inherent to their role, or otherwise impose their will to some degree, if unwittingly. However, the nature of PAR is such that these processes can be identified, exposed, and responded to in ways that are not possible in the “traditional” classroom, which is oriented towards efficiency and reduction of complexity (Biesta, 2010). Engaging students in emergent knowledge creation helps ensure that what they are learning is relevant to their lives.

## PAR is Inherently Messy and Should Stay That Way

Ritterbusch’s (2019) critique of a “toolkit approach” (p. 1303) speaks to the inherently messy nature of PAR and the argument that tidying the approach into neat steps that can be checked off should not be the goal. Similar to the documented experiences of other participatory action researchers (e.g., Fernández, 2018; Guishard, 2009), we each found ourselves in complex power dynamics that stretched us as educators, activists, and scholars. For example, as instructors, we were ultimately responsible for the success of the course, including student learning outcomes and university consequences, which complicated our desire to share power with students in our classes. At times, supporting a participatory approach felt in tension with executing social action (i.e., democracy takes time) or even contradicting equity efforts (e.g., some grades produced from student-grading format mirrored societal inequities; see Dancis, in revision). In those moments, a lifeboat out of the swamp in the form of “solutions” would have alleviated the anguish we felt; but in retrospect, wading in the muck was exactly what we needed to do to feel the weight of

liberation work. The hard truth is that following PAR pedagogy is filled with disappointment and even the risk of harm. Yet, we've each decided to forge ahead because the messiness of sharing power and working towards change with our students beats the "detergent of the academy that exemplifies institutionalized racism, sexism, and classism in science" (Guishard, 2009, p. 94) every time.

### Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that PAR as pedagogy engages with the messy space between the constraints and possibilities of the academy through the co-creation of knowledge, in partnership with undergraduate students. Our discussion emphasizes the centrality and political nature of relationships in the context of PAR and contests that PAR pedagogy should be emergent in nature and responsive to the lives and needs of students. From our individual experiences and collective illuminations, we have taken to heart the warnings against de-politicized PAR modules, and at the same time, found value in the impurity. Our goal is not to greenlight uncritical or exploitative partnerships stamped with a PAR signature. Instead, we aim to embrace the complications inextricably linked with this work and encourage others to forge their own PAR pedagogy, in community with others, and to always (in all ways) stay messy.

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