

Book Review

A Learning Journey through a Heart-Centered Book:

A Review of Wilson, P. A. (2019). *The Heart of Community Engagement: Practitioner Stories from across the Globe*. Routledge.

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Finding the Heart of Community Engagement

In the chapter entitled “Generative Patterns of Practice,” Patricia Wilson reflects back to us what we have also come to deeply appreciate about what it means to become a change agent; speaking to both the synergy and potential energy we discovered this year by engaging with this text:

Becoming a change agent for deep democracy is an ongoing spiral of action and reflection on our own practice that gets deeper - closer to Source, as Scharmer would say - as we tune in to our deepest self and sense fully our co-participation in the living,

evolving social field around us, its emergent possibility, and the purpose that calls us. Therein lies ensemble awareness - the felt sense of interconnectedness and service to the whole. That is the heart of community engagement. (Wilson, 2019, p. 221)

Since 2017 the authors of this book review have co-taught a course on community-based action research with five cohorts of graduate students completing an early childhood leadership certificate. Across these five years, the course focus, texts, and experiences have evolved. Each time we find ourselves more deeply embracing inclusive values and the collective capacity of communities to generate knowledge and prototype actions that will create positive change, especially across the complex systems and spaces where young children grow and learn.

Influenced by our study of *Theory U* (Scharmer, 2018), we have evolved over time to embrace a theory of social change within individuals, groups, and communities that begins with what we call “leading within”. We end each year with what we call a “leading across” capstone project, where graduate students design a process of action learning around a challenge or opportunity to co-create positive change within communities. In more recent years, we have added ways for students to lead inclusive and expansive dialogue with others across perceived boundaries, forms of expression and meaning making, as well as through intersectional identities and lived experiences.

We have come to articulate our pedagogy as grounded in a liberatory stance around the purpose of teaching and learning originally inspired by such voices as Paulo Freire (2015) and author and activist bell hooks (1994). Specifically, when we co-design courses, we bring to life our pedagogy through four leadership learning design principles, namely (1) learners’ *identities and agency* are centered, (2) community and collaboration is at the core of *socially constructed pedagogy*, (3) meaning emerges from *contextually relevant learning experiences*, and (4) an *appreciative stance* illuminates the potential in oneself, and one’s work in community.

This past year, as we began to design the course during the fall of 2020 in the middle of the Covid-19 global pandemic, we evolved the course again. Uncertain how to proceed during a year of profound loss and disruption, we were fortunate to find Patricia Wilson’s 2019 text, where through a series of community engagement stories, she remarkably mirrors pieces of our own journey of what it means to learn with others, while sensing the “invisible web of relationships in which he or she is engaged” (Wilson, 2019, p. 1).

Illuminating Practitioner Identities and Critical Pedagogy

Wilson organizes her text with an introductory chapter sharing her own grounding principles of practice, including her important conception of a community-engaged practitioner. Then through stories, she takes us on a journey organized in three main parts where the inner practice of the change agent

evolves as you go. Each of the seven chapters tell a story of a different place and circumstance, and reflects the growing “inner-awareness” of the community engagement practitioner whose story is being shared.

We found each of these stories to be wonderfully aligned with our own learning design principles. Our students also experienced the synergy of their graduate program through the stories in each chapter.

Key Insights:

- Each story emphasized important aspects of the practitioner's identity and their growing agency as change agents within the broader and often complex change scenarios for deep democracy.
- Each story brought to light how inquiry, dialogue, and reflection among unique groups of people were invited, nurtured and felt.
- The stories drew meaning from the lived experiences unique to each place and context.
- Most importantly, the stories left the reader sensing their own potential to facilitate community-engaged change.

Journeying through the Book's Content

The Heart of Community Engagement is not a methodical text. It does not specifically teach how to identify a research problem or how to write a research question, nor how to design and conduct an action research study from start to finish. Instead, the book journeys the reader through stories where practitioners do the deep inner work, what the author calls “mística” where “facilitators learn the social technologies that can be useful for different purposes.” (Wilson, 2019, p. 218). Instead of methodology, we find the following features of great value as they each inform and inspire the complex processes of community-engaged learning and action.

Stories of Community Change

Wilson includes narratives from seven communities across the globe engaging with a variety of different people and challenging circumstances. These stories of community change are woven together to reveal generative patterns of practice through the lens of the practitioner. Two chapters are drawn from Wilson's own experience and five more from the experiences of other practitioners Wilson has selected. Readers travel the globe, and gain a rich, multicultural perspective on community change.

The Arts

The arts play a role in each chapter of the book “for celebrating the community’s achievements, for connections to sources of inspiration and meaning, for bringing people together, resolving tensions, and creating breakthroughs” (Wilson, 2019, p. 213). For example, in Chapter 5, Building Deep Democracy in South Africa’s Shantytowns, readers follow Joel and Charlotte’s stories, and a series of emerging approaches of self-governance and lessons learned about personal and group processes. Inspired by Charlotte’s model house and the house that was built (see Figure 5.6 in Wilson, 2019, p. 111), our students invited their peers to replicate the experience virtually by creating a space (a 3D model) “where people can learn from each other and make their own changes” (p. 97). Figure 1 offers just one example of the incredibly fertile spaces that were imagined.



Figure 1: 3D model of an imagined space created by reviewers’ student Rosie Evans

Triple-Loop Learning

Readers are invited to engage with the stories intimately in ways that welcome the internal learning processes of change practitioners. This is defined in Chapter 1 as “triple-loop learning,” or as Wilson explains, “the capacity to reflect on one’s own interior state of being...a different kind of learning or knowing that is heartfelt and embodied” (Wilson, 2019, p. 6). Wilson provides thoughtful questions for individual and collective reflection at the end of each chapter. These questions support both self-reflection and the facilitation of small group learning dialogues where readers can grapple with how the stories relate to their own experiences, including the sometimes unspoken aspects of both experiencing and leading change within communities.

Generative Practice Patterns

The final two chapters of the book invite the reader to reflect on 13 generative patterns of practice at play in community engagement. “Often below the surface, these patterns are the most important and influential ones for the practitioner to observe and work with consciously and skillfully” (Wilson, 2019, p. 208). Wilson also offers her own “Personal Credo for Practice” as an “aspirational statement that serves as a guidepost, a set of intentions, a connection to purpose, a reminder of what one stands for” (Wilson, 2019, p. 220). The personal credos written by our group, such as the one below, exemplify the deep learning and self-awareness that can be catalyzed within a community of learners while reading this heart-centered book.

“As a connected human, I believe in the power of love. I choose to love myself so that I can love others. I choose to let love in, so that I can let love out. I believe in staying curious. I choose to always seek to understand and to stay open to the possibilities. I believe in creating spaces where all feel welcome. I choose to be intentional with my actions yet spontaneous, living naturally and with awareness. I believe in a world where every human is inherently enough and every person is valued, belongs and is worthy of being loved. I choose to be mindful of my choices so that they align with giving all people access to the world where they feel and know they are a unique expression of life, worthy and enough just by simply being.” (Graduate student at the University of Colorado, Denver, written reflection, 2021).

It is our wish for all our students of action research and community engagement, that they voice their intentions and purpose with clarity.

Concluding Our First Journey with the Heart Book

We have learned that in our choice of books for this graduate program, we must go beyond simply adopting a text. Instead, we find within us a commitment to embrace each text fully, to live the learning journey along with our students and, if possible, to invite in a conversation with the author. As we approached the conclusion of the course, we shared our experience over the semester with Patricia Wilson, including students’ written reflections in response to the sentence stem, “Something I would like Patricia Wilson to know about our learning community...”. We share one such reflection here:

“... her compilation of stories from around the globe have inspired us to take action in our own local communities, however small they may be. I would like her to know that this work is replicable, relatable, and prevalent in our call to action for a more unified and loving humanity. This text and the concepts presented within, provide an inspiring, confident, and life-giving framework for building a foundation of action research and growth.” (Graduate

student at the University of Colorado, Denver, written reflection, 2021).

We whole-heartedly agree with the back cover description of the text, which states, “this book serves as a much-needed reader of practice stories to help instructors and students find the words, concepts, and examples to talk about their own subjective experience of community engagement practice.” And we would add that it also offers a view into the value of learning from mistakes and the inherent messiness of community engagement that always “remains a work in progress” (Wilson, 2019, p. 3). We are grateful to have made this journey with Patricia Wilson and her community engagement colleagues, where they generously share their own lively curiosity, deep capacities, and moments of opening to an emerging future of social transformation.

References

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