



Cooperative Inquiry for Learning and Connectedness

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Abstract

Over the past few decades, academics and non-academics alike have raised concerns about higher education's self-serving patterns and deviation from a higher sense of purpose. Commentators have exposed reasons for why universities have become less than committed to their communities and society at large; increasing corporatization and commercialization of universities, declining research relevance in the face of complex real-life problems, overwhelming attendance to labour market needs rather than needs of society as a whole, are but a few examples (O'Hara, 2007; Tight, 1994; Shapiro, 2005; Kezar, 2005). Other critics, including Bourdieu, Foucault,

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and Derrida have focused on the role of higher education in perpetuating social hierarchies through control over knowledge and entitled claims to the 'Truth' (Deer, 2003).

In attempting to remedy the university-society schism, some scholars have turned to action learning approaches that implode the researcher-researched hierarchy and unite practice and theory in a way that privileges lived experience, as a means to relinquish 'expert' control over knowledge (Reason, 1999). The concerns discussed above take on a particular salience in professional schools – such as those devoted to management, education and public affairs – that are founded precisely on the aspiration of connecting academics and professionals, and whose members, unlike hard-science researchers in the laboratory, are committed to interacting with the inhabitants of the world they are trying to understand (Ospina and Dodge 2005; Pettigrew, 2001) We argue that Cooperative Inquiry (CI), an action research methodology, can help address the critical problem of the academic-practitioner divide because its democratic underpinnings offer opportunities for establishing a more meaningful relationship between these two groups.

As a systematic process of action and reflection among co-inquirers who are tackling a common question of burning interest, CI democratizes both content and method. It democratizes content by validating practitioner experience and forging a more direct link between intellectual knowledge and moment-to-moment personal and social action (Reason and Torbert 2001). It democratizes method by working in certain validity measures that encourage co-inquirers to systematically name and address power relations that may emerge among members throughout the process, and by requiring that co-inquirers partake in decisions about what operational methods are being used.

In this paper we reflect on our efforts to integrate CI within a research agenda about the leadership practices of social change leaders and their organizations in the United States. Over the course of seven years we have encouraged the formation of 13 CI groups of leaders who have inquired into self-formulated questions about their practice within the context of social change leadership work. We have done this within the academic context of a school of public affairs. We have found CI not only to be a

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powerful research tool, but also a tool with potential capacity to heal the academic-practitioner divide.

However, we argue that capitalizing on CI for establishing democratic relationships is not a simple application of CI within more research projects, or a mere process of implementation alone. This is so because at the heart of CI there are two logics – which we have labelled those of contestation and transformation – that must be confronted to be able to address the role of academia in deploying CI. The logic of contestation frames CI as the antithesis to academic monopoly over inquiry and knowledge. Since the *raison d'être* of CI is to democratize the research process, proponents of this logic might argue that academics need to step away and leave CI for practitioners who have been marginalized from inquiry and learning processes. The second logic is that of transformation, where CI is thought of as a means to engage in the work of creating a more just and equitable society, and thus offers a significant role for academics in this process.

Each of these logics stresses a particular demand. The logic of contestation upholds democracy, particularly the democratization of knowledge production, and may suggest that academics need to retreat from the CI arena. The logic of transformation upholds authority in the service of socio-political missions, and could be interpreted as a call for academic institutions, especially those driven by values of justice, to claim their authority in using CI to fulfil larger social commitments. Both democracy and authority enter as mediators and interlocutors in a dialectical relationship between academics and practitioners.

Central to this paper and based on our own experience is a discussion about the dialectics of implementing CI in academic contexts and the manifestations of democracy and authority. We have learned that rather than thinking of democracy and authority as polar aspirations, which begs the need to find a comfortable middle ground, they can be addressed and exercised concurrently. Understanding the work as infused with dialectics - which are mediated and influenced by both democracy and authority - is a way for fostering a more meaningful relationship between academics and practitioners. Amidst the dialectics, both the research process and the roles of the parties involved are continually shaped; with each change representing growth



towards enhanced connectedness. Grappling with CI, as an inherently participatory approach, allows the dialectics to flourish, creates the space for practitioners and academics to resolve tensions, and presents multiple opportunities along the way that can be grasped for healing the divide.

In writing this paper we not only draw from the experiences of the individual CI groups, but also from documentation of internal team meetings, large co-researcher discussion forums, and integrative papers. We will unpack the nature of the academic-practitioner divide from the purview of a professional school setting, and discuss how CI offers some democratic opportunities for redressing this gap. The paper will illuminate the complexity of this task due to the need to grapple with the dialectics of this agenda, focusing particularly on the two apparent conflicting logics of contestation and transformation. The paper will also discuss some implications for using CI for connectedness, in addition to its more well-known functions of conducting inquiry and learning through praxis.

The ideas and experiences presented in this paper are based on two programs supporting social change leadership. One is the Leadership for a Changing World program, a joint endeavour between the Ford Foundation, the Advocacy Institute, and the Research Center for Leadership in Action (RCLA) based at the Wagner School of Public Service at New York University. Another is the Next Generation Leadership program, a partnership between the Rockefeller Foundation and RCLA. We would like to acknowledge the many contributions of the programs' co-researchers, and our partners at respective institutions, who over the course of the years have actively shaped our learning. We also wish to thank our colleague, Angie Chan, whose ideas were instrumental in shaping this paper.

1. Introduction: CI for Learning and Connectedness

Over the past few decades, academics and non-academics alike have raised concerns about higher education's self-serving patterns and deviation from a higher sense of purpose. Commentators have exposed reasons for why universities have become less than committed to their communities and society at large; increasing corporatization



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and commercialization of universities, declining research relevance in the face of complex real-life problems, overwhelming attendance to labor market needs rather than needs of society as a whole, are but a few examples (O'Hara, 2007; Tight, 1994; Shapiro, 2005; Kezar, 2005). Other critics, including Bourdieu, Foucault, and Derrida have focused on the role of higher education in perpetuating social hierarchies through control over knowledge and entitled claims to the 'Truth' (Deer, 2003).

In attempting to remedy the university-society schism, some scholars have turned to action learning approaches that implode the researcher-researched hierarchy and unite practice and theory in a way that privileges lived experience, as a means to relinquish 'expert' control over knowledge (Reason, 1999). Cooperative Inquiry (CI) is one such action learning approach which we argue can help address the critical problem of the academic-practitioner divide because it offers opportunities for establishing a more meaningful relationship between these two groups who are often considered worlds apart (Shani et al, 2007). CI is a systematic process of action and reflection among co-inquirers who are tackling a common question of burning interest (Reason, 1999; Heron, 1996; Bray et al, 2000; Yorks et al, 2007; Ospina et al, 2007).

In this paper we reflect on our efforts to integrate CI within a research agenda about the leadership practices of social change leaders and their organizations in the United States. Over the course of seven years we have encouraged the formation of 13 CI groups of leaders who have inquired into self-formulated questions about their practice within the context of social change leadership work. We have done this within the academic context of a school of public affairs. We have found CI to be a powerful research tool, one that can democratize research content and process, and unearth deep insights that emerge from the lived experience of practitioners. While recognizing the value of CI as a research and learning tool, in this paper we wish to highlight an additional insight about the nature of CI practice which emerged from our experience: its potential capacity to contribute to heal the academic-practitioner divide.

However, we argue that capitalizing on CI for establishing connectedness is a not a simple replication of CI within more research projects, or a mere process of implementation alone. This is so because at the heart of CI there are two logics – which we have labeled those of contestation and transformation – that must be



confronted to be able to address the role of academia in deploying CI. Each logic stresses a particular demand. The logic of contestation upholds democracy, particularly the democratization of knowledge production, and may suggest that academics need to retreat from the CI arena. The logic of transformation upholds authority in the service of sociopolitical missions, and could be interpreted as a call for academic institutions, especially those driven by values of justice, to claim their authority in using CI to fulfill larger social commitments. Both democracy and authority enter as mediators and interlocutors in a dialectical relationship between academics and practitioners.

Central to this paper is a discussion about the dialectics of implementing CI in academic contexts and the manifestations of democracy and authority. Engaging in a dialectical process while being aware of the influence of democracy and authority can contribute to healing the academic-practitioner divide. We have learned from our experience that rather than thinking of democracy and authority as polar aspirations, which begs the need to find a comfortable middle ground, they can be addressed and exercised concurrently. Understanding the work as infused with dialectics - which are mediated and influenced by both democracy and authority - is a way for fostering a more meaningful relationship between academics and practitioners. Amidst the dialectics, both the research process and the roles of the parties involved are continually shaped; with each change representing growth towards enhanced connectedness. Grappling with CI, as an inherently participatory approach, allows the dialectics to flourish, creates the space for practitioners and academics to resolve tensions, and presents multiple opportunities along the way that can be grasped for healing the divide.

2. The Practitioner-Academic Divide and the Role of CI

The Nature of the Divide

The above concerns about university disconnection take on particular salience in a professional school setting. Notwithstanding the responsibility of universities to fulfill larger missions towards societies, the very nature of professional schools demands the production of knowledge that is both informed by and informs the world of practice. Despite this imperative, professional schools have not been immune to the academe-



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practice disconnect. The specific manifestations of the disconnect have been well documented in the management field (Newland 2000; Feeney 2000; Huff 2000; Rynes et al 2001).

The gap between academe and practice has been widened by a dominant mode of knowledge production that fixes researchers as 'producers' of knowledge, and reduces the role of practitioners to 'subjects' of research and 'consumers' of knowledge, not as legitimate partners in the research process (Gibbons et al 1994; Rynes et al, 2001; Bradbury 2007). In this mode research is led by credentialed academics within the confines of their own disciplines and who are accountable to their own academic communities (Gibbons et al 1994, Werr and Greiner, 2007). The research results are disseminated via peer reviewed journals and conferences, and, whether it is applied or pure research, it is only consumed at the end of and outside of the knowledge development process. The knowledge is then passed 'downstream' to practitioners who have been largely excluded from generating it, but are then expected to try to make it work in the real world.

Practitioners have also disserved connectedness by dismissing the contributions of serious theoretical thinking. Some practitioners become fixated on urgent matters and are not willing to partake in research that extends beyond their immediate needs. The repercussions of gap include, at best, lost opportunities for practitioners to develop strategies and practices that draw upon vast knowledge that exists, and for academics to frame practically significant questions for research (Weick, 2001; Ospina and Dodge 2005; Shani et al, 2007). At worst, the gap results in poor scholarship where the normative recommendations of researchers and actual practices in applied settings do not coincide (Rynes et al 2001).

Opportunities offered by CI to heal the Divide

Embedded in CI are certain assumptions, democratic values, and quality standards that make it particularly suitable for fostering connectedness between academics and practitioners. Like other participatory approaches, CI abandons the sharp distinction between researchers and objects of research by encouraging inquiry among co-researchers who participate fully in all stages. Anti-positivist but not anti-scientific, CI

places the process of knowledge generation in the hands of ordinary practitioners and demystifies research by treating it as a form of learning (Brooks and Watkins 1994).

While knowledge is generated in closed circuits among academics in the dominant mode discussed above and then passed to practitioners, CI validates practitioner experience forging a more direct link between intellectual knowledge and moment-to-moment personal and social action (Reason and Torbert 2001). Rather than divorcing action from theory based on the claim that good theory guides action, and is therefore a priori, predictive, and universal, CI stresses the organic relationship between theory and action, seeing theory as derived in and from action.

Its democratic standpoint requires that certain validity measures are worked into the process to encourage co-inquirers to systematically name and address power relations that may emerge among members throughout the process. When incorporated by academics within their research endeavors, the democratic nature of CI then addresses concerns that universities perpetuate social inequalities through elitist production of knowledge. This is reflected in the following statement: “knowing is not just an academic pursuit, but an everyday process of acting in relationship and creating meaning in our lives” (Reason and Goodwin, 1999: 296).U

Underlying logics of CI and implications for healing the Divide

Based on our experience we suggest that the realization of CI’s potential to help heal the divide requires first and foremost a commitment to embrace two sets of fundamental assumptions, each making up a logic that paradoxically suggests a different, almost reverse role for academia.

The Logic of Contestation - Implicit in the CI epistemology is a critique of the traditional knowledge production model that has dominated academic work. Reason argues that one purpose of CI is to “[relinquish] the monopoly of knowledge held traditionally by universities and other institutes of ‘higher learning’ and [help] ordinary people regain the capacity to create their own knowledge in the service of their practical purposes” (1999: 207). One challenge then is to capitalize on CI for connectedness among academics and practitioners, while acknowledging that CI was

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conceived, in part, to counter academia's monopoly over 'valid' knowledge production (Brooks and Watkins 1994, Reason 1999).

Some may argue that when academics encourage learning, reflection, and research through CI they appropriate the method and reinforce their control over knowledge production. Albeit extreme, some commentators believe that any academic institutional involvement in CI wrongs the process (Zelman in Bray et al 2000: 140). Given such perspectives one resultant argument could be that academic institutions need to downplay their role in supporting practitioner generated knowledge, in the spirit of democratizing knowledge generation.

Aware of this line of thinking, we have been motivated to pay particular attention to democracy in order to maintain the integrity of the CI process. Democracy in this context implies a commitment to addressing and balancing power relations and giving up the privilege automatically conferred to academics as experts (Ospina et al 2004). Paying attention to democracy is essential in its own right, but becomes even more critical when there are deep seated power relations between universities and those traditionally deemed the 'objects' of research.

The Logic of Transformation - In contrast to the logic of contestation, some CI scholars call for academic institutions to step up their role in undertakings of social transformation. The logic espoused by this stream converses on a paradigmatic and visionary level, and we begin to see CI, which belongs to a family of action research, as embroiled in a political and moral endeavor. Reason argues that with its emphasis on developing participative action, CI can contribute to the emergence of 'communities of inquiry' (1998). In a similar vein, Toulmin and Gustavsen write about the need to view research projects as 'political events' rather than mere scientific happenings (1996).

Within this wider mission CI scholars write about 'authoritative facilitation' and 'leadership'. For example, Reason states that the leaders of a society where democratic inquiry abounds must be willing and able to take their authority to propose and initiate collective action. They must in tandem invite others to reach towards a future state while creating democratic structures and relationships (Reason 1998). This wider socio-political call for action requires academics who are committed to a



justice agenda to step in to lead and facilitate processes within their academic institutions.

As researchers, we have shared a social justice vision with the practitioners with whom we have collaborated, and our research has been driven by the imperative to have their work more widely recognized. In fact our research agenda was premised on broader goals of changing the conversation about leadership in the U.S. to call attention to values and practices espoused by social change organizations, such as inclusiveness and democracy. Because we perceive our work as contributing to a social vision, which entails learning and inquiry, we have claimed our authority in the service of that vision.

Embracing the two logics simultaneously - At first glance it may seem that these are contradictory logics espousing dichotomous aspirations; democracy being the crux of the matter for contenders of academic involvement in CI, and authority being the claim for academics driven by justice and social transformation. The result then, of explicitly choosing to hold the two logics in our practice, has been to keep a constant internal dialogue between our aspirations for democracy and authority. Doing so has meant engaging in a dialectical process with CI groups, while claiming our authority in the service of a wider social goal, and while upholding democracy as pursuant to our own ideals and the ideals of CI.

3. The Dialectics of CI – Contending with Democracy and Authority

The logics of contestation and transformation present ambivalent prospects for academia's role in CI and may appear to construct democracy and authority as polar aspirations. Our experience points to a different interpretation where both logics co-exist. Because neither academics nor practitioners single-handedly or pervasively influenced the CI encounter, both groups engaged in a dialectical relationship replete with fusions, fissures, and negotiations. Each group enjoys different forms of power that enter into the dialects and emanate from several sources; the academics' power comes from research expertise, control over financial resources, and the general privilege of being associated with a prestigious institution. The practitioners' power is versed in expertise about social change, their freedom of choice to participate in



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program activities (without which the program would cease to exist), and group solidarity as social change practitioners.

Engaging in dialectics has meant that academics and practitioners have emerged differently from how they entered the relationship. Amidst these dynamics, democracy and authority acted as interlocutors rather than opposing forces. Democracy and authority were in-tandem aspirations, drivers, and legitimators that greatly influenced each group's agenda and practice. In this section we highlight these dialectics through three storied encounters, paying particular attention to how democracy and authority were incarnated in the researchers' experience, and accentuating our account with voices of participating inquirers.

Selecting the CI topics of Inquiry

Each year as the program was extended to a new cohort of participants, we, the researchers and research administrators, convened the social change leaders to welcome them to the program and introduce CI as an action learning option to consider joining. Through open space technology and other democratic approaches, interested participants convened to discuss potential questions that would propel their inquiries and motivate them to join.

While participants were free to choose their own questions, the academic researchers provided a stipulation: the question needed to resonate with the larger community of practice created with the leadership program. Part of our authority was vested in the program mandate to change the conversation about leadership in the U.S., so that by doing so, the work of social justice leaders would be more widely recognized. Our authority therefore behooved the generation of knowledge *about leadership*, whereas some participants were most interested in using research resources to produce technical knowledge that would enable them to advance the particular issues that drove their work. In upholding democracy, we opened room for practitioners to express their expectations and concerns, validating these and responding to them in the moment. Together, we brainstormed to find ways to use the research process to advance their work as much as possible, while still holding primary attention to insights into leadership practices. In the process, most participants

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discovered and appreciated the value of focusing attention and reflecting on their leadership work. That the “[the CI process] allowed us to see our work both ‘up close’ and ‘from a distance’” was the shared sentiment among one group’s participants (Almanza et al, 2004).

While many participants had entered the CI process with great suspicion, those who decided to join CI groups took a risk that they normally would not have taken considering previous negative experiences with academics. Choosing to enter the relationship despite the apprehensions is in itself testament, a small step, towards a more meaningful relationship. One participant indicated: “I do see CI as different than the norm [within] universities. The CI isn’t coming to dissect us. We were a part of a process, we were participating in it” (Anita Rees in RCLA, 2007).

Negotiating the number of CI cycles

Following formation of CIs, each group embarked on an iterative process of reflection and action geared towards answering their chosen questions about social change leadership.

Integral to the process of learning through CI is an evolvment that can never be prescribed or predicted from the beginning. The iterative, organic nature of the action-reflection cycles likens CI to a complex adaptive system which performs best when its order verges on its transition to chaos, at which point its dynamic patterns are heightened to achieve robustness and responsiveness to context (Reason and Goodwin 1999). One co-inquirer used the metaphor of a hurricane to describe the process of emergence that she experienced as occurring within a CI: “complex nonlinear interactions result in a dynamic field which is self-organizing, with the central axis of the hurricane acting as a peg for creative order to emerge” (Theresa Holden, personal communication).

In several instances, in acting with the authority vested upon us as administrators of the research program, we prodded the groups towards the central axis of the hurricane. This was manifested through the academic team’s desire to bring closure to the groups by the fifth cycle as originally planned, and by encouraging the group participants to articulate their learnings and findings in a neatly tied report. The

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report served as an accountability measure of sorts for groups benefiting from resources, and whose insights could benefit others. Yet sheer enthrallment in the CI, which is precisely the intention of the learning process, sometimes presented a challenge for acting accountably, because the group did not feel ready to move from the inchoate to the concrete. To resolve this, one group negotiated for a sixth cycle, a suggestion which was initially met by resistance from the academic team. Yet in upholding democracy, the academic team ceded, and thereon offered the opportunity of a sixth cycle for subsequent CI groups, which was taken by some but not by others.

This dialectical interaction resulted in a shift in the academic team's understanding of authority and democracy. Initially, the team claimed its authority in aligning the groups to the designated number of inquiry cycles, mainly out of a sense of responsibility for the funds provided. This understanding of authority shifted, from being the enforcer of structure, to being the catalyst for inquirers to truly participate and fully engage, in upholding a vision for democratic inquiry. Walking the talk humanized researchers in the eyes of practitioners, who started to respect and trust them in ways they did not expect given previous experiences with researchers. One participant said: "...There was a very strong emphasis on equity and a democratic process that was used that I think it really gave our group the chance, once we sort of relaxed into it, to become very close and spent a lot of time listening to the voices of everybody equally at the table" (Theresa Holden in Ospina et al 2007).

Shaping the meaning of co-production

Many groups grappled with the idea of creating something, over and above the required report, that would bring the experience and its meaning to a wider group of people. Initially the academic team had required a synthesis report from each group, and had committed to creating publications themselves that further distilled the groups' learnings for a wider audience. This was the thinking until one group advocated for using a sixth meeting to create a publication that they wanted to use with a broader audience. The academic team reshuffled budgetary allocations and supported the group by providing a professional editor. Democracy was a mediating factor in this interaction, since prior to the group's request, the academic team had thought of co-



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production as happening within the realm of each CI, as co-inquirers produced knowledge from their own experience that ran parallel to what the researchers were producing through other research streams. It would then be the role of academics to create products for a broader audience. This interaction spurred the concept of co-production to transcend the CI group, and reach a function that was originally reserved for the academics. The new space for co-production represented an additional opportunity for academics and practitioners to reshape their typical roles while still drawing from their unique skills, in ways that strengthened both the relationships and the product.

In this interaction democracy was enacted, but so too was authority. Many groups took ownership over their inquiries and the pursuant knowledge, and wanted to similarly produce publications beyond the required synthesis report. However, the academic team had to claim its authority in several instances and decline the suggestion of a publication. Stemming from its role as overseer of the research component, the academic team made the decisions over what would qualify as a publication by gauging the draft's pedagogical merit and potential to inspire change in others – in essence, the degree to which the publication translated the experience in a way that would be relevant and meaningful to practitioners outside of the specific CI group. Ostensibly, by claiming authority in this way the academic team acted as gate-keeper of the knowledge. Yet in light of the larger role of promoter of participatory research and encourager of democratic communities of inquiry, the academic team felt the importance of reflecting the power of the learning process in the resultant publications and making sure that the resources invested in publications would yield products that were useful for the learning of others. Here, enacting democracy by re-envisioning co-production did not imply the abdication of authority. Both democracy and authority were exercised hand-in-hand in a way that reconciled various interests and fostered a more collaborative relationship between practitioners and academics.

4. Concluding Remarks

In designing, implementing and experiencing the success of thirteen CI groups with social change leaders from all over the United States we learned that CI can be a



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useful tool for healing the academic-practitioner divide in the context of academic-located collaborative research. We have also learned that although democracy and authority present themselves as dichotomous, they can be pursued as in-tandem ambitions. In our experience, being democratic did not mean abdicating our authority, and claiming our authority did not mean that we were compromising on democracy. It is thus important for academics harnessing CI for connectedness to be cognizant of the interplay between democracy and authority, and to pursue them in-tandem. This requires a re-conceptualization from understanding democracy and authority as polar aspirations, to thinking about them as interlocutors, influencers, and mediators of a dialectical relationship between academics and practitioners. It also requires academics and practitioners to think about what drives their authority and their democracy, and to name them as they intersect the relationship.

Once understood as a dialectical relationship, engagement then means that both academics and practitioners shape the process and are shaped by the interaction. Engaging in dialectical interaction creates fusions and fissures, each representing a potentiality for better connectedness between academics and practitioners, assuming that they are addressed with transparency and integrity. Working together through the processes of initiating CI groups, living the inquiry, and thinking about and producing outcomes was replete with collaborative moments. Each resultant nuance, shift, or modification represented a step towards enhanced connectedness. The divide was thus being healed in the action – in working through issues collaboratively – rather than as some victorious end result that appears independent of the work that fosters it. Moments of intense interaction – whether in the form of tensions or amicabilities – comprised the actual work of healing the divide. They were not interruptions or deviations from the process.

Academics seeking to use CI for connectedness, in addition to its well-known functions of research and learning, need to mirror the dialectics embedded in the CI learning process in their relationship with practitioners. By engaging in the dialectics in our case, the goals of practitioners and academics were validated and supported, and genuine collaboration – based on strong trusting relationships - was fostered. Our experience suggests that CI can play an important role in helping reduce the



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practitioner-academic divide, and in the process contributing to bringing the university back into society. The practitioners we worked with recognized this feat and encouraged us to claim our authority in its pursuit, as in the following statement:

“Maybe you (the center) have a vision about what the role of the university can do in our huge society that’s different from what it’s been doing. If that’s true, we (the practitioners) want you to go and do that. We want you to be a university that has reached down to the grassroots and taken some time and got some money and looked at the intelligence and incredible resources and incredible power that’s there and hold it up to the world in a different way. But you have to do that” (Theresa Holden in RCLA, 2007).



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