

# Intersections

Spring 2007



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The Newsletter of the



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Leadership in Action**  
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### Introduction

*This issue of Intersections focuses on the dynamic relationship between academic research and practice.*

### Voices from the Field

*Hear about first-hand experiences with research collaboration.*

### Try This!

*Learn a new technique for opening up the space for collaboration.*

### Methodologies

*Learn about designing a hybrid methodology for action research.*

### Recently Published

*Read about recent publications from RCLA on the power of research collaboration.*

## Introduction

For many, **practice** and **research** are like neighboring cities separated by a deep gorge; they may be close, but without a well-designed bridge, there isn't much travel, trade, or cultural exchange. In this issue of *Intersections*, we examine a variety of theoretical bridges and bridge-building efforts—which are often ground-breaking frameworks for collaboration between practice and research. This work is central to much of what RCLA does. It reflects our belief that knowledge resides in the community of practice and that academic-practitioner collaboration is a powerful strategy for expanding our understanding of how leadership operates in nonprofit and government settings.

***"We need to find a way to institutionalize this action-reflection work in our organizations."***

***- Emily Lopez  
YMCA of Greater New York***

## Resources

[RCLA Publications](#)  
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## Our Team

RCLA is supported by a [team](#) of full-time and part-time staff, a number of whom are NYU Wagner graduate students:

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Our research and documentation work for the Leadership for a Changing World program is the epitome of collaborative research, and many of the learnings are included in this issue. Given our experience in this area, we are also acutely aware of both the opportunities and challenges of this interdisciplinary approach. The work has powerful benefits, but it is not easy. It requires both sides to confront issues of language, trust, and power. Several of the stories here address both the advantages of our methods and these concerns. [Voices](#) features insights into the process of how practitioners and researchers can develop co-equal roles in knowledge production. [Try This!](#) provides a set of activities that can help practitioners and researchers overcome initial misgivings and enter into a productive and collaborative research process. [Methodologies](#) explores how a thoughtful hybrid research design can help resolve issues of voice. [Recently Published](#) highlights a practitioner's guides spearheaded by community leaders in tandem with RCLA researchers.

As you will see from this newsletter—and more concretely from many of the publications generated by RCLA's commitment to this kind of collaborative research—the deliberate attention to these issues yields insight that practitioners value and use, while deepening or extending theory in ways appreciated in the academy.

We hope you enjoy this issue, and we welcome your [feedback](#)!

Amparo Hofmann, Associate Director  
Mitty Owens, Associate Director

## Voices from the Field

Practitioners must often overcome serious misgivings to participate in and ultimately experience the benefits of collaborative research. In [From Consent to Mutual Inquiry](#), RCLA researchers describe how lead researchers chose to include both academic researchers and [Leadership for a Changing World](#) (LCW) award recipients (who are community-based practitioners) in the LCW research and documentation efforts. This publication examines both how researchers initially encountered and then overcame participants' distrust to create a research process that yielded important benefits for the practitioners and ultimately strong publications and products as well.

From the beginning, the researchers understood that they were fighting an uphill battle with the LCW awardees. For one thing, the RCLA scientists were associated with academic institutions perceived by some in the LCW group to perpetuate power hierarchies and exclude the voices "on the ground." Others LCW participants, like Vicki Kovari who had worked with the Detroit's Metropolitan Organizing Strategy Enabling Strength (MOSES), didn't see the relevance of research at that time for her work. In RCLA's LCW cooperative inquiry [Don't Just Do Something, Sit There](#), she notes, "Most [practitioners] think that these kinds of reflective [activities] are at best a luxury, and at worst, an excuse not to take any action."

In response, the RCLA researchers began by articulating a clear framework for understanding the multiple roles of practitioners as sources, consumers, and notably **producers** of research (For more information on this framework, please see RCLA's [Narrative Inquiry and the Search for Connectedness: Practitioners and Academics Developing Public Administration Scholarship](#)). By adopting this approach, the RCLA researchers consciously challenged LCW participants' perceptions by laying out a new, positive model for collaborative knowledge production between researchers and practitioners and a new role for participants as **co-researchers** in academic research.

Ultimately, the participants bought into this thinking (though it did take some time), and the group developed a process that was mutually beneficial. As one LCW participant, Abby Scher, noted:

*"[The academic researchers] listened. They paid attention. They kept track. They reminded us of things. But they were really trying to help us arrive somewhere else without constantly inserting their own thinking."*

By the end of the initial set of projects, one RCLA researcher reflected on the evolution of another LCW participant in the group:



*"Given her skepticism [about co-research], I was surprised, two years later, to hear her present the findings from her strategic thinking inquiry group. She talked about the important conceptual insights the group had produced and the value of the process itself... She saw the value of academic-practitioner collaborations for her work."*

Through the process, practitioners gained a variety of insights into their leadership practice. While many started their inquiries reflecting on how they could improve the conditions for and the leadership development of those they served, many realized that they needed to develop their own leadership skills in working with their partners, staff, and constituents. For example, in [Don't Just Do Something, Sit There](#), practitioners originally asked themselves how they could better teach people to be more strategic, conceptual, and creative in their thinking. Through the inquiry, participants realized that organizers can be action junkies and not very creative about how they evaluate their actions. In the document, they note:

*"[The group] began to consider a different view of the purpose evaluation serves in [their] organizations. We came to understand the difference between training people to implement an action and developing their ability to think like creative and strategic leaders. We concluded that strategic, conceptual, and creative thinking is best developed through processes of inquiry that engage the learner."*

In another example, a group of social change leaders reflected on how they could create spaces and opportunities for individuals to first recognize and then develop themselves as leaders. The answer they developed in [A Dance That Creates Equals](#) focused on the relationships they had with individuals in their organizations and communities. In order for others to learn to take up leadership roles, these leaders realized they needed to recognize their own power and find ways to counterbalance power differences so that others could "step up" into leadership roles. They talked about the many ways they could "step back" to make room including: leaving others in charge while traveling, and being silent during meetings to give others a chance to take the lead. These processes can help to recognize and build the power they believed was inherent in the individuals with whom they worked.

As Joan Minieri, an LCW awardee, noted, "If [practitioners] more fully see the benefits of being co-researchers, more may choose to increase their engagement." Scher, who has worked in the progressive organizing community for many years, reflected that participation in this kind of process may be critical towards engendering new approaches to challenging social problems:

*"The world is changing quickly, and I think we keep organizing and thinking in the same way. We have to open ourselves up to new directions that we don't even know yet... I think when you work in a group that is diverse [including practitioners and academics], that it challenges people because they're hearing things from a different point of view... So that can create fertile ground for thinking something new."*

Not only can collaborative research aid leaders on the ground, but it also improves the quality and relevance of knowledge that comes out of the academy. With researchers and practitioners working together to collect and interpret data and present findings, the scholarship produced is richer and more nuanced, better descriptive of the real experience of leadership in the field.

For a deeper discussion of the challenges and opportunities of research collaboration, please see these RCLA publications:

[Narrative Inquiry and the Search for Connectedness: Practitioners and Academics Developing Public Administration Scholarship](#)

[From Consent to Mutual Inquiry: Balancing Democracy and Authority in Action Research](#)

[Co-Producing Knowledge: Practitioners and Scholars Working Together to Understand Leadership](#)

**Want to Know More? Please visit:**

<http://wagner.nyu.edu/leadership/publications/>

## Try This!

Both researchers and leaders have held onto stereotypical (though all too often accurate) views of research and the production of knowledge. Traditional academics demand rigorous, objective, and quantifiable measures. They rely on their own expertise to mold the knowledge creation process, and they treat practitioners as subjects to be observed and analyzed. Conversely, leaders in the field generally view researchers as too far removed from the realities on the ground. They produce, say practitioners, insight that arrives too late to make a difference in real time or that is not relevant to what leaders see as their most important and immediate challenges.

Collaborative research, of course, can provide a strategy for developing projects that yield useful information that is more responsive to leaders' needs. Below, we suggest some things to keep in mind in order to get participants' preconceptions and assumptions out on the table and begin the process of building mutual trust and respect.

If you are an agency leader or practitioner and are engaging a researcher to conduct an evaluation for your organization or project, you can:

1. Remember that the roles you play *are* different and that you *do* come from different worlds, each with a potentially important contribution. Honor this difference!
2. Consider the following key dimensions where differences might arise and discuss the rules of engagement around them early in the process, each with a willingness to meet somewhere in the middle:
  - Pace—Academics work slowly and want to make sure the research process follows its course before coming to early conclusions. Practitioners want results fast and are eager to close the research process earlier, to see conclusions faster.
  - Criteria of quality/success—Academics want to ensure that basic social science rules have been respected. Practitioners want to make sure the results are *relevant*.
  - Language—Academics tend to use a specialized vocabulary and want to incorporate in the products of the process both the logic and evidence used to draw conclusions. Practitioners want clear and concisely written products.
3. Establish milestones whereby progress can be assessed and adjustments made to satisfy both parties.
4. Finally, and most importantly, like any other successful collaboration, one between academics and practitioners is built on *trust*. To build trust, in turn, the first step is to see the “other” with the eyes you would like the other to see you: as a human being capable of and willing to produce extraordinary results under the right conditions. Use that inner message to develop a solid, human relationship and the rest will follow. Successful academic-practitioner collaborations can and have produced extraordinary work.

For more about this topic, see:

The 3-part Narrative Inquiry Series in *Public Administration Review*, 2005. [Part 1](#). [Part 2](#). [Part 3](#)

Amabile, T.M., Patterson, C., Mueller, J., Wojcik, T., Odomirok, P.W., Marsh, M., and S.J. Kramer. 2001. Academic-Practitioner Collaboration in management Research: A

Case of Cross Profession Collaboration. *Academy of Management Journal* 44(2): 418-31.

Ospina, S., Dodge, J., Godsoe, B., Minieri, J., Reza, S., and E. Schall. 2004. [From Consent to Mutual Inquiry: Balancing Democracy and Authority in Action Research](#). *Action Research* 2(1): 47-69.

Rynes, S.L., Bartunek, J.M., and R.L. Draft. 2001. Across the Great Divide: Knowledge Creation and Transfer between Practitioners and Academics. *Academy of Management Journal* 44(2): 340-75.

Salipante, P. and J.D. Aram. 2003. Managers as Knowledge Generators: The Nature of Practitioner-Scholar Research in the Nonprofit Sector. *Nonprofit Management and Leadership* 14(2): 129-50.

## Methodologies

Traditional social science research is often predicated on an unequal relationship between academics, who frame and then control a research project, and leaders or practitioners, who serve as research subjects. Collaborative approaches to inquiry, such as action research, are meant to equalize this relationship, lifting the voice and highlighting the perspective and role of the practitioner. This can be easier said than done. In a forthcoming publication, *Taking the Action Turn: Lessons from Bringing Participation to Qualitative Research*, RCLA researchers discuss how the desire to address perspective or “voice” in a project with the practitioners from the [Leadership for a Changing World](#) (LCW) program resulted in a hybrid research design that yielded important benefits.

The paper talks about some of the consequences of introducing participatory practices into a qualitative social-change leadership research project. The authors analyze the context that influenced their choice to create a “hybrid” design mixing traditional qualitative practices with participatory practices. They discuss the subsequent choices they had to make about their “positionality” vis-à-vis research participation and the kind of knowledge they were able to produce for both academic and practitioner audiences. The authors also reflect on the tensions that these choices created for whoever would *control* the research process, the extent to which the project could live up to an *action* orientation, and whose *voice* was represented in both the process and the products that were produced. The authors conclude that embracing participation enriched the research but also provided hard-earned lessons about the tradeoffs of taking the so-called action turn.

In approaching this effort, RCLA researchers were acutely aware of practitioners’ distrust of their position in the “ivory tower”—far removed from the swampy realities of their workaday worlds. At the same time, these researchers recognized how hard it would be to create products acceptable to an academic community that is often distrustful of qualitative, participatory research.

To address both concerns, the researchers devised the hybrid research process noted above that utilized three different participatory research methods: [narrative inquiry](#), [cooperative inquiry](#), and [collaborative ethnography](#). Each of these allows participants to influence the data collection process, giving them multiple opportunities to contribute, and in many cases, participants engaged in analysis and writing. Cross-analyzing the learnings gleaned from projects using different methodologies allowed researchers to ensure that participant voices were central in a project’s overall findings. The result has been collaborative yet exacting research that balances the viewpoints of researchers and participants.

Importantly, this hybrid research design confounded traditional roles and power dynamics. The researcher was no longer an outsider studying insider practitioners. Rather, the RCLA approach enabled practitioners and researchers either to work in a composite group or as insider-outsider teams working in reciprocal collaboration. Depending on the research method used, power was shared in different ways with differing results. For example, in narrative inquiry projects—which use a qualitative method that focuses on stories as a main vehicle through which insights about practice can be communicated—practitioners exerted less influence over the research and



design. In contrast, cooperative inquiry is dependent on practitioners to identify an issue of pressing concern to the group and then to define a series of action and reflection cycles that yield new insights. These projects, not surprisingly, exhibited stronger participant contributions.

In the end, the hybrid process resulted in myriad products that appeal to practitioners and academics alike. To review these publications, please click [here](#).

In *Taking the Action Turn*, the authors conclude that while integrating the voice of practitioners improved the quality of the products, it also complicated the research process. "Inviting multiple voices enhanced the diversity of the data, but also posed challenges in creating a clear and consistent argument around the overall findings," they noted. The authors recommend that researchers interested in using similar approaches pay particular attention to this issue and to develop an understanding of the research standards required from each approach.

## Recently Published

Unpacking Practitioner Knowledge through Dialogue: *Second Terms: Leveraging Victory*

*Second Terms: Leveraging Victory*, an executive summary of the [Leading Large Scale Change](#) (LLSC) series sponsored by RCLA and Accenture, is a concrete example of practitioners playing an active role in knowledge creation through dialogue. "Second Terms" is based on a December 2005 panel, part of a breakfast series for public sector managers in which senior managers hold dialogues on pressing strategic challenges. This panel examined the unique challenge that a second mayoral term presents to NYC managers. During the second term, managers worry less about steep learning curves and more about how to leverage existing relationships cultivated during the first term. In the next term, managers must strike the right balance between launching new programs and maintaining existing ones. They also have to retain talent while preparing for future leadership transitions.

To download this and other LLSC summaries, please visit the [LLSC site](#).

*Calculus of Courage: Understanding the Multiple Factors that Influence Risk-Taking in the Public and Nonprofit Sectors*

*Calculus of Courage*, based on the experience and findings of an RCLA inquiry, defines the variables that influence "courageous action," that is, the behaviors and decisions for which an individual experiences significant risk on behalf of a social purpose. This inquiry convened a series of conversations with senior executives exploring their own risk-taking in the public and nonprofit sectors. The goal of the project was to examine the multiple factors that influence an individual's ability to take courageous action under difficult circumstances. To read about the factors that produce courageous actions and how these actions play a role in leadership and meaning making, download the report [here](#).

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The Research Center for Leadership in Action at NYU's Wagner Graduate School of Public Service translates personally held practitioner experience into shared expertise and leadership theory into useful instruments. Through a variety of programs, seminars, and research, RCLA is committed to creating new and cutting-edge knowledge by addressing real leadership problems...from the ground up.