GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY

Applying Action Research for Social Change and/or Environmental Sustainability

Multi-Unit Graduate Course:
School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution
College of Education and Human Development, Ph.D. Program
College of Science: Environmental Sciences & Policy
Schar School of Policy and Government

Offered in Arlington and Fairfax Simultaneously
Arlington Campus: Founders Hall
Fairfax Campus: Merten Hall 3001

Spring 2019
3 Credits

PROFESSOR:
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Prerequisite: Acceptance into a graduate program at George Mason University.

COURSE DESCRIPTION:
Action research is a unique paradigm for addressing complex, significant real-world problems in a grounded, democratic and reflective fashion that enables theory and practice to mutually inform each other, yielding actionable and grounded results. Students will have the opportunity to explore the theory and practice of action research across a range of contexts, cases and practices, as well as to conduct their own action research project, either individually or in small groups. By the end of the course, students will have developed the capabilities, wisdom and experience to engage in their own action research projects and evaluate their own and others’ projects from multiple perspectives.

In addition to the students’ pilot action research projects, the pathway to achieving these learning objectives includes practice with collective inquiry, action-reflection cycles, use of self as instrument, self-reflection, systems thinking, surfacing hidden assumptions and dynamics, and opening, as Scharmer says, to possible futures existing in the present. Students will engage with key considerations for the integrity and transformative power of action research. These considerations include questions of inclusion/exclusion, positionality, ethics, and issues of power...
and voice across diverse forms of collaboration and co-creation, as well as questions such as the following. How can action research catalyze positive social change and environmental sustainability? How can we embody the principles and values of participatory action research within not only the content but also the process of research, practice and learning? What is required for data collection and knowledge creation to be participatory in a truly democratized co-owned process? How are questions of validity and reliability transformed in the context of action research?

The course is designed to embody the principles and practices of action research within the learning process. Accordingly, students will be co-creative partners in their own learning and in the collective learning of the class as a whole.

DELIVERY METHOD:
As mentioned, the course aspires to embody action research principles and practices into the conduct and unfolding of the course.

This course will be delivered face-to-face and by way of teleconference on both the Arlington and Fairfax campuses, with the possibility of an occasional off-site meeting if desired by all registered students. In addition, course participants will be required to engage in their research projects (individually or in teams) outside of class sessions, with some class time devoted to discussion of each student’s project and corresponding ongoing research decisions, challenges, opportunities and reflection.

Course materials will be posted via Mason’s Blackboard Learning Management system (LMS), housed in the MyMason portal, http://mymasonportal.gmu.edu. You will log in to the Blackboard (Bb) course site using your Mason email name (everything before @masonlive.gmu.edu) and email password.

Technical Requirements: To participate in this course, participants will need to maintain consistent and reliable access to their GMU email and Blackboard, the official methods of communication for this course.

LEARNING OUTCOMES:
I. Knowledge and Understanding
• Understanding the overall meta-theory and meta-practice of participatory action research as well as diversity in forms, contexts, manner of application
• Understanding validity, reliability and ethics in the context of action research
• Understanding positionality and recognizing dynamics of power and voice
• Examining complex realities at multiple levels and from diverse perspectives/standpoints
• Examining one’s own influence and role in the dynamics of interactions, realities, and systems in which one participates
• Understand how to identify, appropriately choose and incorporate a range of research methodologies and skills within an action research framework and orientation, such as: interviews, focus groups, surveys, participant observation, ethnography, autoethnography, case studies, etc.
II. Qualitative and Quantitative Skills
- Capacity to conduct an action research project
- Systems and complexity thinking
- Co-creation of learning process and content
- Ability to use self as instrument in action research: Recognizing and modulating one’s intended and unintended effects on complex systems and relationships
- Seeing situations from multiple perspectives and worldviews
- Ability to engage in and facilitate action-reflection cycles to develop theory and practice
- Use AR methods to explore and discover processes of change

III. Professional Development and Leadership
- Ability to carry out action research across a range of contexts
- Systems thinking and ability to develop whole-system awareness
- Bringing reflective awareness to seeing one’s own ‘being’
- Ability to move beyond zero-sum games of right/wrong, agree/disagree, into leveraging and incorporating the possibility of simultaneous yet divergent truths and realities
- Enhanced ability to engage with other people and teams in ways that support and encourage the best from all participants, including oneself.
- Ability to harness collective wisdom in complex systems to design more effective practice and theory for human well-being and ecological sustainability.

Learner Objectives (discursively presented)
This course is designed to enable course participants to:
1. Understand the varieties and defining characteristics of action research (e.g., describe the common characteristics of action research and its many forms (PAR, CPAR, YPAR, Practitioner Action Research, Teacher Action Research…)
2. Analyze the impacts of decisions about inclusion/exclusion in the action research process of various possible stakeholders for the topic chosen for research
3. Formulate a plausible AR approach for testing a theory of change for a given challenge.
4. Develop and practice skills of how to do systematic research “with” people rather than “on” people, and articulate the rationale for this approach
5. Develop self-awareness in context sensitive communication, self-reflection and participatory approaches to address internal biases while conducting action research
6. Outline/describe ethical considerations common to the action research process
7. Initiate and undertake an action research project.
8. Identify and reflectively engage with ethical considerations operative within the student’s own action research project (and discuss complexities within peers’ projects as well)
9. Analyze and reflectively engage with power analysis in the research project and issue
10. Analyze and reflectively engage with issues of inclusion/exclusion in the student’s action research project
11. Analyze the operative (tacit and/or explicit) theory of change in the research project
12. Analyze process considerations in the research project, including the relationship between process dynamics and project outputs/products/findings.
13. Engage in both individual and group reflection as part of the action research process
14. Collaboratively and democratically scope the project with the action co-researchers, and scope the student’s role in the project, including planning for and designing a thoughtful, ethical and practically viable approach for exiting the action research
15. Write up the research experience and results in line with action research values and principles
REQUIRED TEXTS (any editions are fine):

Kegan & Lahey (2001). *How the way we talk can change the way we work: Seven languages for transformation*

*Note: Book chapters and articles will be listed as weekly assignments. Research in library databases and in action research journals is an expected part of the course. Additional books may be decided collectively.*

ASSIGNMENTS & GRADING
1. Participation and co-creation of an action learning classroom. Taking responsibility for and leading your learning. Contributing to others’ learning. Co-creating a learning space that honors each person’s dignity, diversity and unique forms of contribution. Class preparation and engagement. Being present (in the full sense). 15%
2. Conducting supplemental research and exploration of action research theory, practice and case studies, and creatively sharing these explorations and discoveries in various formats including designing in-class learning activities: 20%
3. Interim presentations and submissions of research process, ideas and reflections and sharing of resources and materials, both in class and online in Blackboard posts and discussions: 15%
4. Final presentation in class: 10%
5. Final paper
   - Group Report on Action Research Project: 15%
   - Individual Reflections on Action Research Process, Products, and Individual and group process and learning: 25%

Required Attendance and Participation:
- Phones/laptops/electronics are only allowed for publicly acknowledged and sanctioned activities or special formally recognized needs. Otherwise, please be fully present to each person without mediation.
- Missing more than two class periods decrements your overall grade by 1/3 for each additional missed class period beyond the first two. Please communicate with the professor *in advance* of missing a class period. Where appropriate, make-up or partial make-up work may be allowed for missed class period(s) on a case-by-case basis, to be decided in student-professor dialogue.

Doctoral Student Additional Requirements: Each doctoral student enrolled in the course will read additional doctoral-level materials and complete assignments at the doctoral level in line with his/her doctoral program of study, ensuring doctoral level work in this course. Doctoral students may choose to engage in action research that can contribute to their proposed dissertation topics or other relevant doctoral level work. The doctoral specific required work will be worth 30 points, meaning doctoral students will be graded on their work on a possible total of 130 points.
Miscellaneous:

**Mentoring/Advising:**
If you would like to schedule a one-on-one meeting to discuss course requirements, content or other course-related issues, we can meet in person, by phone, or by video-conference. You’re welcome to reach out by phone/text anytime, and/or to email me to schedule a time (in which case please specify a preferred meeting method and suggested dates/times).

**Netiquette:**
Some of our class communications will be via Blackboard. Let’s create a group culture that is collaborative, respectful of each person, authentic and attuned to the sacredness of each human being. Please re-read your responses carefully before you post them. Be positive and mindful in your approach to others. At the same time, in reading others’ posts, accord generosity and attribute good intentions. You are not competing with each other but co-creating a learning environment. Prioritize inquiry over advocacy.

**Written Assignments:**
All formal written assignments will be evaluated for content and presentation. (Formal assignments do not include Blackboard discussions, class/course feedback, in-class reflections or journaling). Accepted style guides include the American Psychological Association, Sixth Edition (APA), Modern Language Association (MLA), Chicago Manual of Style, 17th Edition. Please follow your chosen reference style consistently for all formal written assignments. BEFORE submission, please proofread carefully for grammar, syntax, spelling, clarity, organization (including paragraph breaks and topic sentences), and references. If you are not confident in your own ability to catch errors, please seek support from the writing center and/or another person to proofread your work. It is important to ensure that all sources are cited appropriately and accurately. Please see discussion below regarding plagiarism and ensure that this does not occur. In your writing, please be sure to:

- Present ideas in a clear, concise, and organized manner.
- Develop points coherently, thoroughly, and
- Bring self-reflection, self-awareness and perspective taking to your thinking, group interactions, writing and research decisions and processes
- Document and cite sources appropriately
- Use evidence and data to support all claims and assessments (Please refer to Nonviolent Communication for the distinction between observations and evaluations/judgments/assessments; please avoid over-generalizations and unsupported opinions, and please examine and make explicit your assumptions)
- Use correct capitalization, punctuation, spelling, syntax and grammar, and organize your paper coherently and effectively, including appropriate use of section headings, paragraph breaks and topic sentences.

**Research Projects:** Students will engage in an Action Research project either individually (doctoral students) or in groups (Master’s students). The research project will be conducted
with integrity of action research methods, ethics, values, reflection, and principles. For those with no or limited prior background in action research, we will cover these issues in class.

Alterations:
Faculty reserves the right to alter the syllabus and schedule as necessary, with notification to course participants.

CORE VALUES COMMITMENT
While students in the course will be drawn from across Mason graduate programs, the course participants are asked to work within the core values as articulated by the College of Education and Human Development: collaboration, ethical leadership, innovation, research-based practice, and social justice. Course participants are expected to adhere to these principles: http://cehd.gmu.edu/values/.

GMU POLICIES AND RESOURCES FOR COURSE PARTICIPANTS
Policies
· Course participants must adhere to the guidelines of the Mason Honor Code (see http://oai.gmu.edu/the-mason-honor-code/).
· Course participants must follow the university policy for Responsible Use of Computing (see http://universitypolicy.gmu.edu/policies/responsible-use-of-computing/).
· Course participants are responsible for the content of university communications sent to their Mason email account and are required to activate their account and check it regularly. All communication from the university, college, school, and program will be sent to course participants solely through their Mason email account.
· Course participants with disabilities who seek accommodations in a course must be registered with George Mason University Disability Services. Approved accommodations will begin at the time the written letter from Disability Services is received by the instructor (see http://ods.gmu.edu/).
· Course participants must follow the university policy stating that all sound emitting devices shall be silenced during class unless otherwise authorized by the instructor.

Campus Resources
· The Writing Center provides a variety of resources and services (e.g., tutoring, workshops, writing guides, handbooks) intended to support course participants as they work to construct and share knowledge through writing (see http://writingcenter.gmu.edu/).
· The Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) staff consists of professional counseling and clinical psychologists, social workers, and counselors who offer a wide range of services (e.g., individual and group counseling, workshops and outreach programs) to enhance course participants’ personal experience and academic performance (see http://caps.gmu.edu/).
· The Student Support & Advocacy Center staff helps course participants develop and maintain healthy lifestyles through confidential one-on-one support as well as through interactive programs and resources. Some of the topics they address are healthy relationships, stress management, nutrition, sexual assault, drug and alcohol use, and sexual health (see http://ssac.gmu.edu/). Course participants in need of these services may contact the office by phone at 703-993-3686. Concerned course participants, faculty and staff may also make a
referral to express concern for the safety or well-being of a Mason student or the community by going to http://ssac.gmu.edu/make-a-referral/.

Support for submission of assignments to Tk20 should be directed to tk20help@gmu.edu or https://cehd.gmu.edu/aero/tk20. Questions or concerns regarding use of Blackboard should be directed to http://coursessupport.gmu.edu/.

Plagiarism:
All submitted work must be your own, and it is imperative that you thoroughly, accurately and appropriately cite all sources in your work. Work for this class must be new work conducted uniquely for this course. However, doctoral students and masters’ students writing theses may use this course and the research project to contribute to and advance their dissertations / theses. In this case, please explicitly discuss with the instructor how the coursework interleave with your projects.

- GMU is an honor code university. The Honor Code statement, including definition and statements on Plagiarism, can be found here: http://mason.gmu.edu/~montecin/plagiarism.htm
- You are responsible for reading and familiarizing yourself with the definition of plagiarism and how to ensure that you do not either intentionally or unintentionally engage in it.
- In addition, you must cite any time that you reuse your own work, indicating all previous uses you have made of the same work in this or any other class.
- Violations of plagiarism policies can result in expulsion from the university.
- To quote from GMU’s policy as emailed to me on 3/20/08 by the SPP office: “The profession of scholarship and the intellectual life of a university as well as the field of public policy inquiry depend fundamentally on a foundation of trust. Thus any act of plagiarism strikes at the heart of the meaning of the university and the purpose of the School of Public Policy. It constitutes a serious breach of professional ethics and it is unacceptable. “Plagiarism is the use of another’s words or ideas presented as one’s own. It includes, among other things, the use of specific words, ideas, or frameworks that are the product of another’s work. Honesty and thoroughness in citing sources is essential to professional accountability and personal responsibility. Appropriate citation is necessary so that arguments, evidence, and claims can be critically examined. “Plagiarism is wrong because of the injustice it does to the person whose ideas are stolen. But it is also wrong because it constitutes lying to one’s professional colleagues. From a prudential perspective, it is shortsighted and self-defeating, and it can ruin a professional career. “The faculty of the School of Public Policy takes plagiarism seriously and has adopted a zero tolerance policy. Any plagiarized assignment will receive an automatic grade of “F.” This may lead to failure for the course, resulting in dismissal from the University. This dismissal will be noted on the student’s transcript. For foreign students who are on a university-sponsored visa (e.g. F-1, J-1 or J-2), dismissal also results in the revocation of their visa. “To help enforce the SPP policy on plagiarism, all written work submitted in partial fulfillment of course or degree requirements must be available in electronic form so that it can be compared with electronic databases, as well as submitted to commercial services to which the School subscribes. Faculty may at any time submit student’s work without prior permission from the student. Individual instructors may require that written work be submitted in electronic as well as printed form. The SPP policy on plagiarism is supplementary to the George Mason University Honor Code; it is not intended to replace it or substitute for it.”
Please note the following (does not replace the foregoing – supplements it)
- Direct quotations must be enclosed in quotation marks, with references to the corresponding source and page number(s).
- Paraphrased ideas should appropriately reference the source materials.
- Some plagiarism is involuntary but this is still plagiarism and has severe consequences. To protect yourself from this, take notes carefully. In your notes, always 1) use quotation marks around direct quotations and include source and page references, and 2) make clear what ideas come from which sources, versus are your own ideas.

PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS FOR CEHD STUDENTS:
This course fits with the core values of the College of Education and Human Development and other academic units, which include collaboration, research based practice, innovation, ethical leadership, and social justice.

This course is designed to meet the following professional teaching standards:
● GMU Dispositions for a Career Educator I, II, and III
  ○ Commitment to the Profession
  ○ Commitment to Honoring Professional Ethical Standards
  ○ Commitment to Key Elements of Professional Knowledge
● Teachers College Columbia Teacher Expectations I and II
  ○ Lifelong Learners
  ○ Learner-Centered Educators
● NBPTS Propositions 2, 3, and 4
  ○ Teachers Know the Subjects They Teach and How to Teach Those Subjects to Course participants
  ○ Teachers are Responsible for Managing and Monitoring Student Learning
  ○ Teachers Think Systematically about Their Practice and Learn from Experience

GRADING SCALE
94-100    A
90-93     A-
87-89     B+
83-86     B
80-82     B-
75-79     C
74 and below F