

University-City learning for sustainable and inclusive urban futures: Two community-based action research experiences in Europe

Beñat Flores-Puga, John Andersen, Aitor Zuberogoitia, Martin Severin Frandsen and Kristian Nagel Delica

Abstract: Universities face growing pressure to align teaching with urgent social, economic, and environmental challenges in their territories. This article examines how community-based action research (CBAR) pedagogies can foster reciprocal university-city learning through two initiatives at Roskilde University and Mondragon University. Drawing on documents, student work, surveys, interviews and field notes, the comparative analysis shows how CBAR principles were enacted through project-oriented and challenge-based work, design thinking, and shared civic infrastructures. The article shows how CBAR can reposition universities as civic partners in urban transformation while exposing tensions around time, power, and participation.

Keywords: university-city relations, community-based action research, urban transformation, PPL, design thinking.

Aprendizajes sobre la relación universidad-ciudad para futuros urbanos sostenibles e inclusivos: dos experiencias de investigación-acción comunitaria en Europa

Resumen: Las universidades afrontan una presión creciente para que su docencia e investigación respondan a retos sociales, económicos y ambientales de su entorno más cercano. Este artículo analiza cómo las pedagogías basadas en la investigación-acción comunitaria pueden favorecer un aprendizaje recíproco universidad-ciudad, mediante el análisis de dos iniciativas desarrolladas en la Universidad de Roskilde y la Universidad de Mondragón. A partir del análisis realizado de documentos, trabajos estudiantiles, encuestas, entrevistas y notas de campo, el artículo muestra cómo se han articulado los principios de la investigación-acción comunitaria mediante proyectos basados en problemas y retos, el pensamiento de diseño y el uso de infraestructuras cívicas compartidas. El artículo sostiene que las pedagogías basadas en la investigación-acción comunitaria pueden repositionar a las universidades como agentes de transformación urbana, al tiempo que hace visibles tensiones en torno a los tiempos, las relaciones de poder y la participación.

Palabras clave: relación universidad-ciudad, investigación-acción comunitaria, transformación urbana, PPL, design thinking.

1. Introduction

Cities have become central to contemporary economic and political dynamics, shaped by digitalisation and the rise of platform capitalism. While often celebrated as engines of innovation and social organisation (Glaeser, 2011), urban growth has frequently deepened spatial inequalities and governance challenges (Taibo, 2021). These tensions create new demands for institutions embedded in urban life, including universities.

Policy and research agendas have increasingly framed higher education as a key actor in territorial development, asking universities to assume broader social responsibility and to support collective responses to local and global challenges (GUNI, 2017; Parr et al., 2022; UNESCO, 2015). In response, many institutions have experimented with more participatory and place-based forms of teaching and research. Action research traditions have long emphasised collaboration between academics and communities to co-produce knowledge and support social change (Greenwood & Levin, 2007), while recent work on “learning cities” has highlighted the role of universities in building infrastructures for shared inquiry and civic engagement in urban settings (Facer & Buchczyk, 2019). Community-based action research (hereafter CBAR) brings these strands together by positioning students, staff and local actors as co-researchers working on concrete issues in specific territories. In action research for territorial development, students can be understood as territorial actors who facilitate territorial stakeholders’ reflection and action (Karlsen, 2020).

Rethinking knowledge production has been central to this approach. Corburn (2003) distinguished between professional knowledge, which is standardised and formalised, and local knowledge, which is rooted in everyday experience and particular places. Although planning and urban policy have traditionally prioritised professional expertise, there has been growing recognition that local, experiential insights are indispensable for addressing complex territorial challenges (Corburn, 2003; Larrea & Costamagna, 2024). CBAR in higher education builds directly on this shift by treating the city as a classroom and local actors as partners in inquiry, rather than as passive recipients of expert solutions (Frandsen & Andersen, 2019; Fricke et al., 2022; Infante Mora et al., 2019).

Approaches to CBAR, including Community-Based Research (CBR) and Participatory Action Research (PAR), have been proposed as transformative frameworks that integrate knowledge production and educational practice, seeking to revitalise higher education as part of the democratic public sphere (Levkoe et al., 2018). CBR reconfigures university–community relations by recognising communities as “knowledge-rich partners”, rather than positioning academic institutions as sole knowledge producers (Ochocka & Janzen, 2014, p. 19), and by organising work as iterative cycles in which knowledge co-production, validation of lived experience and action-oriented dissemination are mutually reinforcing (Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Strand, 2000). PAR extends this orientation by drawing on critical, participatory, and action-oriented traditions and aiming to intervene in power relations (Dancis et al., 2023).

CBAR, as used in this paper, refers to approaches that combine these community-based principles and participatory methods in research contexts, by engaging community and academic partners in knowledge production for community well-being and health (Tremblay et al., 2017). Within this framework, an emerging discourse emphasizes the “Students-as-Partners” (SaP) model, where students participate as co-researchers on the basis of reciprocity and mutual respect (Cullinane & O’Sullivan, 2020, p. 45). This also implies moving students