

Interview Transcription: Barbara Brown Wilson

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ANDREW KAUFMAN: Tell me a little bit about what the course is, what you do, what your learning objectives are, and how do you engage the community in that course?

BARBARA BROWN WILSON: The Methods of Community Engagement and Research course is a core course in the first year of the master's in Urban and Environmental Planning. But as we've discussed, it's meant to be really an introduction into thinking about partnerships differently, and how do we engage in processes of discovery, right? We have a question we want to answer or a problem we want to solve, how do we really collaborate and share power, share knowledge, share resources in ways that allow for new types of learning? We've been studying things in a vacuum for hundred years or so and thinking about new ways to understand especially really complex intractable problems that are often very community specific. What I'm trying to equip my students with is a whole range of skills, a whole toolbox of options for them to be able to draw from when they're working, either in sort of planning practice or out in the research world later.

I expose them first to ethical frameworks that they may not have otherwise heard about, and indigenous ways to understand knowledge production, and then methods that help you think outside the box. So, in planning practice, often the de facto method has been a bit of a town hall where you report on, you consult people, right, you report on what's happening, and then you say, any questions? What do you think about this? But 50 years ago, Sherry Arnstein wrote a pretty famous piece that I think has gone beyond just planning, but it is from a from a planning journal, about the ladder of citizen participation, right? And if you think about consultation, it's actually on the middle rung, which is tokenism. And so, we're always trying to push past that and think about power very differently and it's sort of the testing of a hypothesis that the work will be better. When people feel trust, they feel heard, they feel engaged. And, they're there for question formation. They're there for doing data collection and then analysis of the data, the people with lived expertise. And so, the course is really meant as a bit of a survey of all the types of methods one can do.

And as you'll see, the learning objectives are much more about humility, becoming an empathetic professional, who is able to de-center your technical knowledge as a part of a shared project, and then also really how to develop constructive community-based partnerships.

And the final project that you work on steadily and you apply the tools of the class when you can, but throughout you work towards a final project. That's a group project, typically done in a bit of an interdisciplinary set of students and they're working with a partner.

And then this course in particular, it's a part of a series. So, they ideally are working with the same partner all year long, which allows them to really amplify their ability to contribute. And in this case, we

always let them pick which project they want to work on. And sometimes they do move around, just to get different experiences.

The partners are all incredible. They're brilliant, brilliant partners doing amazing things in the community. So, for instance, this semester, we had Siri Russell, who's the director of equity inclusion for Albemarle County, who is developing the first equity profile and working with us on an equity atlas. She has this community roadshow she's calling it where she's going out and meeting people where they are. That we helped her set up and run last summer. We analyze that data and help her think through how are other communities doing this, interviewed her staff as a part of that.

Jordy Yager, Mapping Cville project, which is incredible and all about really truth telling, whole storytelling about the history of urban planning, and, specifically in Charlottesville, mapping racial covenants. And so that's archival work. And with us, he has the students working on looking at meeting minutes, where decisions were made about infrastructure provision, and the public funding of waste and water services in the 20s. And not surprisingly, those correlate directly to the parts of town where racial covenants were applied. Only white families were allowed to move there. And then we think through with him about the implications of this for today, right? What was the takings of not allowing some communities to have those services? In that case, it's really archival methods that you're learning in your group project and then series work. It's really more about interviewing and kind of case study analysis. And those are those are examples that have carried through the last few years of the work. And they make it really fun I think for the students because they know their work is going to have immediate effects.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: In mid- or early March, you get the news that suddenly you have a week to transition your course online entirely. How did you react to that news initially? How did your students react and how did the community partners react?

BARBARA BROWN WILSON: With that week of processing, I think we were all doing our own kind of situated experience, right, of trying to shelter in place. And so, my reaction in thinking about the course was initially what is an equity-minded way to do this? I have no idea. I've never had to translate anything online. I'm not sure my partners are even capable because of course, they're all doing amazing frontline COVID disaster response work. So, I checked in with them say, is this even a thing you want to continue doing? And they all said yes, because they're amazing.

I knew the projects, they already had set up memorandums of understanding with solid scopes of work. There's been so much work done to set up a transparent system of accountability for the projects that it did not need translation. And then for the project itself, we knew how to say, okay, well, there's three things we can't do in person, and we won't do those. That part felt okay, like, as long as our partners were able to still make mental space for this, which they all wanted to, then we could figure that out.

But I was very equity-minded and thinking, okay, so I'm doing all this learning, and it seems like asynchronous is the way to go. And I'll offer up a couple different options that are allowing me to sort of curate something because this course really has always been developed with the interaction and workshopping of methods is a huge part of it. It's fun to be together. We use skills that you do actually learn to help people process traumatic, collective events, like body mapping and other things. It's hard subject matter, but we get outside together and we body map with chalk, and we talk about how we feel at the end of the semester. Really, it's very interactive and very much about being together and so I

had no idea how I was going to make that translate into a locked in your house Zoom pandemic thing. And then I realized in my thinking that I was shortsighted because the most important learning objective of the course is humility and co-production, right? Like the methods of co-production and the precondition of your own humility as a part of that. And I was like, I don't know what they need, I need to ask them.

The first class back, I had sent them an email that said, here are four options. Here's a menu of things that I know I'm capable of and think about it. And if you have any ones that you want to add before class, let me know. They had a few days to ruminate. And no one responded, so I had no idea was what I was going to get from them. Once we came into class, and we got there, and they all just giggled when they could see each other's faces and it was not what I expected at all because they wanted to be together. They needed to be able to process and this course had become a solve in the moment of limited interaction.

And so, they said, nope, we absolutely want this time together; do not asynchronous us. And instead, we need to take an assets-based strategy, which is one of the things I teach them is really, okay, what is the asset of this that we can draw from in this moment to make this so meaningful for our learning? And they said, well, we are no longer in person, which means that all of your fabulous colleagues that do this work across the country are probably available for an hour. That's probably true. And so, I curated a guest list that had some of the people that are fabulous here that were already planning on coming and sharing their methods because they were all kind and available, but also brought in people from all time zones in the U.S. We tried to really make that piece a positive. They wanted learning but they were I think still pretty stressed out. Things were changing really rapidly and so they didn't want to have to do all the intellectual work of class time themselves.

In the end, they voted for something that I did not expect, which was we will have our class time. It will be mostly absorbing a lecture from some national level expert on whatever method we were going to learn. And we added a few people that are disaster recovery related in particular, I had one, but we added another who does kind of engagement through disaster and very specifically.

Then I had my office hours online, so if you wanted more dialogue about the readings, which we normally incorporate in, but we felt like was harder to do through Zoom, especially with this guest lecture option. There were a few people that came and deeply engaged in the readings and the topics, and then those who were just stressed out or needing to be completely asynchronous, could watch the recording later, and just contribute to their group project. So, they told me what they needed, and we did that.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: And it sounds like the community partners were very flexible and very amenable to that.

BARBARA BROWN WILSON: Yeah, I think because I've worked with them for years, this group. It was easy enough to talk it through even though they were in kind of acute situations like Siri Russell, is the head of equity and inclusion for Albemarle County, but they don't have human services. And so, she became the crisis response person. I did not expect her to say yes, of course, I can still make mental space for this, but in fact, she did.

And Jordy was running the Support Cville website, which was like being birthed in real time to make sure that people got the emergency funds they needed, and people were connected with services, and he still had the mental space to. And I think it's partially because they knew I wouldn't exploit them.

Part of the work early in the course is understanding that learning with a partner is a privilege, and that you have to really respect their time, really cultivate professional levels of communication. And we'd already set up some very good ground rules that made it to where it wasn't like a constant stream of emails asking questions that they could find on the internet, if they just looked carefully. Instead, it was a very professional engagement where they knew it was going to be worth their time. So it was. I'm very grateful to them, but I do think it's partially because the students were doing such great work.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: How did it change the class? You alluded to the things you did differently, but the class itself as a whole, how did this experience change the class?

BARBARA BROWN WILSON: It changed the class in the way that it became much more about a lecture series with an optional discussion rather than an interactive experiential course, where we discuss the readings. We often had a lecture, but it was a portion. And it really shifted us in terms of the way content was delivered, because there is so many limitations to this online format for communicating in rich ways. So, we would we use the breakout rooms some, but for the most part, the course became more of a lecture series than I wanted it to be originally, but it worked.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: It sounds like you were able to capture, with all these relationships that you had, to kind of create a larger community of voices who could work with your students. But the piece that was missing was that face to face, the relationship building. How much of a loss was that for this course?

BARBARA BROWN WILSON: It's hard to know how much we lost partially because it's hard to take away all the other factors, right? I think had we been not in a pandemic and able to be experiential with one another, it would have been a much better course. There's no version where I say, oh, this worked so well. This will be an online lecture forever. Definitely not. This course is, in its best form, it is the opposite of that because it's all about what you learn in real time, via deep engagement with actual other humans, and often learning where they are, right? It's all about going and learning together. So, in the moment, it ended up feeling really important.

The other thing I didn't mention, the other thing we did together for the first month of in our homes moment was we would go around and everyone would say how they were before the lecture began and just whatever was on their mind. What was new? It didn't have to be a divulging of your deepest thoughts if you didn't want to but checking in and hearing each other's voices was fascinating and often took 15 minutes of our time together. But people had family members, they were afraid, who were sick, and people had family members who lost their jobs. And they were stuck in a roommate situation that was weird. And it was a bit of a therapy session for all of us to be able to just check in and share how we were. And we weren't always great, but that felt important, too. It changed the course in some ways that were not ideal, but we made the course a resource for what the students needed at the time.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: Have you thought about next semester? Have you thought about how, if we are online or hybrid or some weird combination, you are going to recapture that experiential component, that relationship building component that's so important to the course?

BARBARA BROWN WILSON: I have thought about it and I don't have any perfect answers, yet, especially if we're only online. If we're only online, I think you try to do the assets focus of, okay, every incredibly engaging brilliant person I know who works across the globe on these issues, I will draw from my networks and it will be a really fun way to learn and not about the experiential as much. I don't want to put people at risk unnecessarily. I'm trying to get my head around that in very slow order.

And I have a hearing loss. I'm not very excited about teaching with masks on because I read lips as a part of how I hear, so there's things like that. I think my department chair is actually buying us all clear masks in case we need to speak to one another in the classroom, which I'm very, very grateful for, but I think the experiential piece will be different, will be limited in many ways, mostly because I don't want to ask my partners to put themselves at any greater risk than everyday life. And it's so unclear what everyday life will be.

But so much of what we do early on is the teaching of the ethics of research, right, and diminished autonomy is one of these concepts that you have to learn as you take the human subjects review board. It's from the Belmont Report. We all take that certification, and all understand the concepts behind it. But justice and diminished autonomy are two of those really critical concepts that I think make it hard to risk engaging when you could be exposing your partner to harm.

Instead, I think what we'll likely do, if things don't change much, is with Jordy's work, he's made it so you can do almost all of it online. Jordy Yager's project and Mapping Cville. And working with the Jefferson School African American Heritage Center is such foundational and inspiring work, I can imagine engaging in a few different content analyses and in archival data can work pretty easily online in ways that are helping to barn raise this really important project. You can understand about inequity and how it manifests in the world, but you don't ever have to go ask another person to risk their health.

And there are other nonprofits like the Center for Nonprofit Excellence is looking at a dashboard that might give real-time feedback about what nonprofits need, and maybe we could help them update that by doing interviews that are useful, community-driven, discrete in terms of what is needed. And so, our students will learn and it's very unlikely that they would do any harm in the process. It may end up that the projects are smaller, and you're learning via contributions, but they're less about the partnership, which is insufficient to their full learning experience, but we're working to make sure we all stay healthy.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: As you think about what you and your students went through this past semester, how did this crisis or kind of the context in which we live now, how did that affect your students' understanding of the subject matter of the course itself?

BARBARA BROWN WILSON: I think it was incredibly instructive because we talked so much when we were together and these moments of partnership building about decentering yourself. I gave them a sort of survey of all the different types of ways that this is thought about from activist research, action-oriented research, action science, there's a lot of different participatory action research, community-based work, a lot of different words, but they all are fundamentally about making space for other types of knowing and for people to bring their full selves to the work. And a lot of that requires being patient and being humble, right, that you don't know everything and that your lived experience and somebody else's lived experience are probably wildly different. And it means that they can't always even answer the question the way that you formed it. And if it's not open and if you're not really thoughtful about question formation and partnership formation.

I was incredibly proud of them because the students, what you saw in their final presentations were real awareness and sensitivity to the amazing work that our partners were doing. And they really talked about how they, when they altered their projects, they did it not because of their own busyness and limitations, which were really honestly as much my concern. I wanted to make sure my students are not taxed by this wherever they might be. But they were really concerned with our partners and making sure that their learning didn't get in the way, their sort of motivation and desire to learn didn't get in the way of the partners important work they were doing. Students are so eager to learn and they're so eager to be in the mix, learn by doing, and I believe in learning by doing, but sometimes learning by doing is actually doing things slowly and out of the way and listening, right? And they were able to exercise those skills in this crisis in ways that exceeded my expectations and I think made the work incredibly meaningful to the partners.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: How about you? Did you gain any insights into your discipline, however you want to define that, as a result of this?

BARBARA BROWN WILSON: The students, during the last half of the course, kept asking how do we do this, how have other places done this when you had to be online? And I sincerely wanted to give them a good solid answer to that question that allowed for all the lenses of justice and mutual respect that we had learned. And I really couldn't find that silver bullet version of things. And so, that's good to know, because I looked really hard for options and we talked to a lot of experts that even work in other types of crises that maybe I really just hadn't been exposed to.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: As you think about your teaching, specifically, did this crisis kind of challenge or reinforce any paradigms that you had about your role and purpose as a teacher?

BARBARA BROWN WILSON: It's a great question. I had several students get hit by the white supremacist terrorist in the car in 2017. And some of those same students were actually there being counter protesters at the rally. And so, my teaching for the past few years has been informed by how you support people, while they try to heal from trauma, and it's always been a part of my research, because I deal with environmental justice and climate justice issues where there's collective trauma and people have suffered in a way that is not just acute to the moment of the storm, or whatever urban stressor they're experiencing, the trauma, they're experiencing it collectively, right?

And so, in my teaching, I have for the past few years had to cultivate an awareness of what does it look like to do healing-centered learning? If we're being assets-based instead of deficits-based, we don't do trauma-centered learning; we do healing-centered learning, right? We're trying not to necessarily focus on the trauma. We need to process it. We need to know this is a real thing that exists, and we need to talk it out. But we need to be focused on what we need, to heal, and that's going to be different for every person. And that seemed to stay the same in this case.

I don't think any of my students were dealing with the level of acute trauma that we know many hundreds of thousands of people have experienced through this crisis. They had a variety of ways that they were having to process their grief, but I use the same models that I ended up using or the same way of being that I ended up using with the students.

One student had both her legs broken by that car, by that terrorist in the car. And she had to heal, and she used her community-engaged work, we were working with the youth at Friendship Court, a set of

youth leaders that we had a longstanding relationship with. And that was one of the solves for her was feeling connected to something bigger than herself.

I continue to learn through those methods that are about recognizing our pain and then also trying to make sense of it together and then make decisions that let that truth exist, but also let us move forward focused on how we build something better.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: It doesn't sound like there was any fundamental paradigm shifts just a deepening of intuitions that you've had all along.

BARBARA BROWN WILSON: I don't know that I had them all along, but I think after the Unite the Right rally, I developed them. And so, because I have experience teaching through trauma before, I think I just found ways to do them online. But I can't say they were they were natural to me, but making space for a variety of emotions to be present and to honestly, something I learned from Dorothe was actually about making space in your learning objectives to think about five years from now, right? What do you need in five years? Because you're not going to retain every bit of what I teach you in this class. Brains don't work that way, anyway much less in a crisis. But what will you remember about this course in its most fundamental sense in five years that will arm you to be the sort of learner that you clearly want to be if you've signed up for this? Right? And so, I think in that way, we held true to that and I think they're going to go out and do great things, partially because we made space for the fact that they were living through a crisis.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: As you think about what success as a teacher looks like to you, has that changed at all as a result of this past semester? Have you shifted your definition of teaching success? Or has it remained the same? Or deepened?

BARBARA BROWN WILSON: I think my understanding of my role in the classroom has always been that I am a good stage director. And a good stage director helps the actors remember their lines, right, helps make sure that the learning experience, the performance that we share together goes smoothly, and everyone feels good about what happened in the end as a collective. And I think that's still pretty fundamental to the way that I teach or at least what my skills allow me to be impactful doing. And that's hard to do on Zoom, and it's hard to have that conversation that allows for people to really feel, oh, I can ask this question and I can challenge, and I can banter, right? You kind of have to raise your hand and wait because you're not sure about the lag time online. So, I think I'm going to hold true to the you learn the most when you're a really good stage director. And maybe as we move into the fall, try to figure out more ways to hone that skill and knowing that some or all my students will be contending with these mediums.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: As you step outside of your role as a teacher, as a scholar, UVA employee, just thinking about your role as a citizen, as a person, maybe as a mother, are there any life lessons that you have personally learned, have gained, or are starting to think about as a result of what you went through in the past couple of months?

BARBARA BROWN WILSON: Yes, definitely. In terms of life lessons, I have been so inspired by my local community and the ways in which the mutual aid network just blossomed and solidified, and it wasn't magic, right? There were pre-existing relationships that made that structure really strong. But I've spent a lot of my time feeling very grateful to live in a community where I feel connected with the types of

robust grassroots networks that are just fearless to making sure that all the children in our community were fed and everybody had broadband access that needed it. So, it's been a tremendous honor to be adjacent to and mildly supportive of that work.

My role at the Equity Center is really one where we're trying to help UVA as it's trying to sort of be a good neighbor, a part of its strategic plan. It's really a pronouncement that it's making really boldly. And I know President Ryan is really focused on being the best possible neighbor we can be. We're also an anchor institution, right? And so, thinking about how we think collectively through trauma, and doing that together has been powerful for me.

We've been involved, with the Equity Center, not only in thinking through how we support our contract workers, but also in thinking through a testing strategy that's community driven. Hundreds of people have now gotten tests that otherwise didn't feel safe to get them because they were instead in the Jefferson School African American Heritage Center, in the local church, and in places that are meaningful to communities that don't necessarily love going to our health system. And we've been able to support reentry for frontline workers. So being a part of that has been incredibly meaningful for me.

I've learned about myself that I need to be a helper. I have a pathological maybe need to help and so really early in the crisis when it felt really hard to be with people because I have my own young kids that I was needing to also support, that was hard for me. I have learned that is actually a form of healing for me to help.

Then in terms of thinking about the world, I have a brilliant friend, Liz. She's an inspiring thought leader for me. So, we were talking the other day and she does human-centered community-engaged work and she is talking about time very differently. I think us being all trapped in our respective places of sheltering has made us all have to slow down in some ways, right? We no longer commute and many of us are also homeschooling, and so thinking differently about time. I refuse to think there are any silver linings to a crisis that kills hundreds of thousands of people and has disparate impacts on people of color. I just refuse full stop to think about that positively. I do hope that as we reopen, re-enter that we reinsert systems that are justice-oriented to make sure that we're really proud of the way that we restructure ourselves going forward. And so, time feels somehow related.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: Two more questions. What advice do you have for other community-engaged faculty teaching, not necessarily online but in this particular moment?

BARBARA BROWN WILSON: I think teaching in this particular moment when we're going to have a range of different experiences happening in our student body—and we're not going to anticipate them all, there's just no way—and honestly a range of different experiences that are hard to predict for our community partners as well, we're going to have to be really patient and kind.

I think teaching in this moment will require some holding what is the essential knowledge that we want our students to gain and how do I measure their progress in ways that might not have been conventional in the past because I think the experiences of our students and the experiences of our partners are going to be fluid and thus our teaching is going to need to be fluid in order to meet them where they are.

I can plan a class right now, I will be all summer planning a class that will have community partnerships, and those situations for those community partners can be fundamentally different by the time we get to

August and so I can do my best planning possible and I still have to hold a lot of space for the idea that I'm going to have to do this differently and that's going to have to be okay.

I always say to my community partners that I like to under promise and over deliver and I say that about the work. If we under promise and over deliver, then we can exceed expectations whereas if we say our students are going to be able to do these five things for you as a community partner, that just might not be true and we're going to have to hold a lot of space for the fact that we're in a pandemic and someone may get sick or their family members may get sick and we still have to hold space for them to learn.

That feels like the most important thing, how do we hold enough space for the grace and patience that our partners can still get what they need, and we can still get what we need as learners without like taxing each other.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: What does it mean to you to be a community-engaged teacher in a time of trauma?

BARBARA BROWN WILSON: I teach about climate justice a fair amount. When I'm not teaching about community-engaged methods, I teach about climate justice. So, I'm always thinking about what it means to be a community-engaged teacher in a time of trauma because I'm teaching practitioners who may very well be going and helping people through trauma. I think you must be patient. You must be outcomes-oriented and flexible, and you must hold creative space for the belief that there's something better when people engage with one another in their problem-solving.

In the resilience literature, resilience theory, there's a lot of work where we've learned from ecological systems about adaptive thinking, an adaptive problem-solving and adaptive systems, adaptive cycles, and one thing about an adaptive cycle is you go from early kind of growth entrepreneurial stages into a stage of consolidation and standardization typically. Then something happens. There's a tipping point. There's a crisis. There's a change. There's a forest fire, whatever it is in ecological or in human systems, that makes you go into a phase that's, the theorists refer to it as the back loop, but makes you go through a phase that's about creative destruction and the regeneration ideally towards something different, and so your system changes.

What gets me thinking about my teaching and about the world of practice that I'm trying to help people inform as they move into their next career journey is how do you take that system and make it as adaptive as possible. If you hold as much space for the lived experience of people suffering through trauma, suffering through a back loop, that everybody's experience is going to be different, but you're all going to kind of have a shared humanity. How do you bring that present and actually make that a part of your decision-making process towards more just systems, more just outcomes?