



Learning With at the Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice

Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice Mission:

Together with partners, we develop and champion evidence-based, justice-centered solutions to ending cycles of violence.

Introduction

At the core of the Kroc IPJ mission is to co-create learning with our partners in the San Diego region and around the world. We call this “Learning With.” Through the Learning With process, the Kroc IPJ develops evidence that is deeply grounded in the lived experience of our partners, that is made rigorous by our place within a university ecosystem, and that creates practical strategies that can be immediately applied to end cycles of violence.

What Does Learning With Mean?

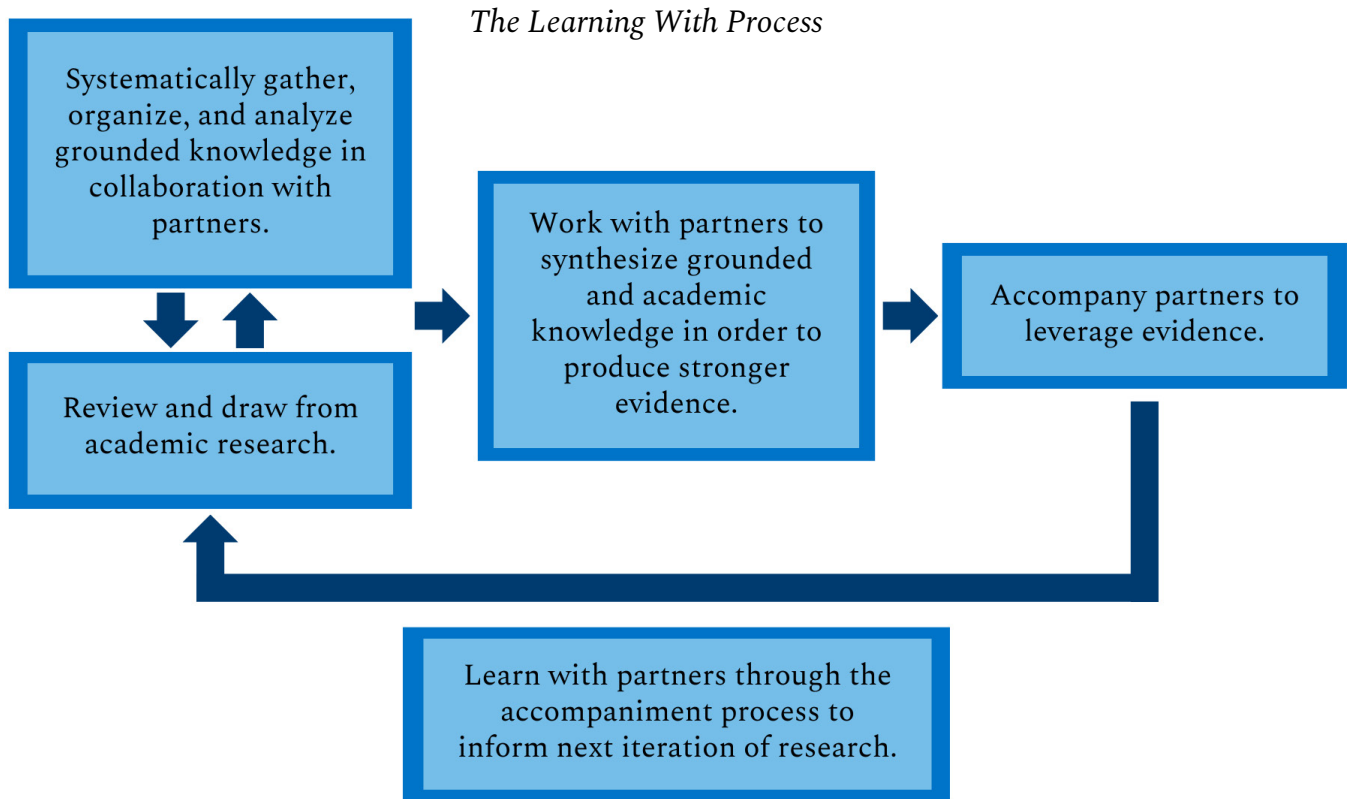
The Learning With process is a form of participatory research - “an umbrella term for research designs, methods, and frameworks that use systematic inquiry in direct collaboration with those affected by the issue being studied for the purpose of action or change.”¹

For the Kroc IPJ, the participatory Learning With process begins with developing sustained relationships with networks of partners working directly on, or living through, cycles of violence. Research is not conducted on individuals. Instead, the Kroc IPJ works with its partners to develop and implement an ongoing research and learning agenda over the longer-term.²

Based on their lived experience working to disrupt cycles of violence, or being impacted by violence themselves, the Kroc IPJ’s partners have a deep understanding of the dynamics of violence in their communities and the solutions that may or may not work to address that violence. The Learning With process works through three phases that channel this grounded knowledge into actionable, evidence-based learning. The process, as it is described below, should be seen as general framework that informs the design and implementation of all of the Kroc IPJ’s initiative. Each of the Institute’s projects does not follow this process exactly, and the process is often not as linear as it is presented

¹ Lisa M. Vaughn and Farrah Jacquez, “Participatory Research Methods: Choice Points in the Research Process,” *Journal of Participatory Research Methods* 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.35844/001c.13244>

² These networks include the Kroc Border Fellows network, the Women Waging Peace network and the Peace in Our Cities network, among others.



here.

1) A Dual Research Process

Grounded Knowledge: The Kroc IPJ gathers, organizes, and analyzes grounded knowledge in a systematic and rigorous way. The goal of participatory research, as the definition above notes, is not just to engage with, or collaborate with, those most impacted by violence, but to undertake with them a systematic inquiry into their understanding of how to disrupt cycles of violence in their communities. Grounded knowledge is often tacit, or diffused, or difficult to access. So intentional strategies need to be undertaken to gather it in ways that create authentic, credible, actionable learning.

Academic Research: While the Kroc IPJ is gathering and analyzing grounded knowledge, it takes advantage of its place in a university to access and interrogate academic knowledge. Through this analysis, we look for patterns that can put our research with our partners into a broader context and set baseline expectations regarding what we should expect to find as we work with partners. We look for where the findings of our localized research and the broader academic research align, which can provide reinforcement for what we are learning in communities. Crucially, we also look for where our localized research and the broader academic research don't align, as it is often through the investigation into that disagreement, that we are able to push forward a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the issues we are researching.

For example, as part of its [FACE Peace Initiative](#) on digital peacebuilding, the Kroc IPJ gathered and

analyzed research from a wide range of academic fields, including education, nursing, psychology, business administration, public administration, computer science, and law. The initiative combined the findings from this analysis with research on the experience of partner organizations, particularly during the COVID pandemic, to develop evidence-based guidance on when and how to use in-person, online, and/or hybrid modalities in the design of peacebuilding initiatives. This learning is being disseminated throughout the peacebuilding field not in traditional ways, but also continuously being fed back to the initiative's partner organization to help them immediately improve their practice.

2) Synthesizing Grounded and Academic Knowledge

The goal of the dual research process is to bring grounded knowledge and academic research into dialogue with each other in order to produce a deeper understanding of the contexts in which the Kroc IPJ works. The process of synthesizing insights gained from both kinds of knowledge leads to evidence that is stronger than one could produce by only learning from communities or only learning from academic research.

Our partners can help us understand the weaknesses and gaps in academic research. They can illuminate dynamics that researchers are not paying attention to, or promising new solutions that haven't been assessed yet. They may help us see the oversimplifications or even prejudices in an existing body of research that undermine the credibility or applicability of the research. Conversely, academic research helps us assess what we are learning from community partners. Academic research can also help deepen our understanding of the grounded knowledge we are gathering by helping to illuminate the broader, underlying mechanisms driving social processes. Academic research can help us illuminate where there may be dominant narratives among partners about what's going on in their community that don't represent the full complexity of what is happening in their communities.

For example, as part of its work focused on recidivism prevention in San Diego, the Kroc IPJ was able to bring grounded knowledge from its community together with the broader academic research on recidivism. One insight provided by the academic research was that recidivism prevention programs have generally struggled to produce meaningful reductions in recidivism. This caused us to be skeptical of optimistic claims of success for some recidivism programs in San Diego. Conversely, one insight provided by the grounded knowledge was that academic research is quite useful at assessing the effectiveness of specific programs, but has little to say about the challenges those coming out of prison have navigating between various programs and social service providers.³ The Kroc IPJ's research concluded that just improving the effectiveness of programs was not enough and recommended that resources be devoted to helping recently incarcerated individuals address the navigation challenge.

3) Accompaniment and Fostering Shared Understanding

Through the dual research and synthesis processes, the Kroc IPJ works to produce evidence and learning that can be applied to end cycles of violence. Toward that end, we work to ensure that

³ For a discussion of this research, see, Andrew Blum and Alfredo Malaret Baldo, "Addressing the Recidivism Challenge: Lessons from Lived Experience Approaches," Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice Report, April 2023, pg. 12.

the evidence produced is accessible to, and can be understood by, policymakers, practitioners, and other key decision makers. This means not only producing accessible research outputs, but also intentionally working with partners on strategies to create a shared understanding of what the research results mean for their work.

Creating this understanding and sense of shared meaning is not a one-time occurrence, such as the dissemination of a report, but an ongoing engagement. This “accompaniment” process allows us to continually tailor the research and evidence we produce to ensure it is of maximum value to our partners and to others who are using the research as part of their work. It also helps inform future iterations of research. Thus, in this way, the Learning With process continues from the design of the research all the way through the application of the research.

For example, the Kroc IPJ co-facilitates the [Peace in Our Cities](#) network of 25 cities, representing over 20 million individuals worldwide. NGOs within the member cities are also part of the network. Evidence and learning are constantly flowing throughout the network bringing city governments, NGOs, academics, funders, and other government agencies together. This mutual sharing requires that evidence be made mutually intelligible and actionable by all those participating in the network.

Collaboration - From Beginning to End

The Kroc IPJ’s place within a university combined with its strong networks of community partners gives it the capacity to develop and implement this three-part Learning With approach. Crucially, the collaboration occurs throughout the Learning With process. Partners are deeply involved in the design of the research initiative, the gathering and analysis of grounded knowledge in their communities, in the dialogue with the academic research, and in the process of sharing out and leveraging the results of the research.

Why Use a Learning With Approach to Create Actionable Research?

The Kroc IPJ uses a Learning With approach because it creates actionable evidence that can be leveraged to disrupt cycles of violence. There are three key benefits in particular to using this strategy.

1) Evidence That is Rigorous and Applicable

The first important benefit to using a Learning With approach derives from the synthesis of grounded knowledge and academic research that is at the heart of the Learning With approach, which creates strong evidence that can be more effectively applied to drive change. The approach helps our partners draw lessons from relevant academic literature as part of the process of crafting localized solutions. In addition, the approach helps situate and adapt research by academics to local contexts in ways that respect the capacities and limitations of communities, as well as relevant political and social dynamics that may impact the success of initiatives when they are implemented. In this way, relevant local knowledge is made more rigorous and academic knowledge is made more applicable.

For instance, the Kroc IPJ [Women PeaceMaker Fellows](#) implement localization initiatives in which they assess with local partners if and how broader research findings are relevant to their local context, how those broader findings need to be adapted to their local context, and so on. Thus, the broader findings are informed by the localized findings, and vice versa, creating actionable evidence that can be applied globally and by the Women PeaceMakers themselves in their own context moving forward.

2) The Right Questions, the Right Solutions

In any given context, there may be many strategies to create positive change that are infeasible, and only a few that are feasible. Moreover, without the input of those most directly impacted, it is difficult to assess a given solution. Is it creating a positive and meaningful change? Are the tradeoffs involved with implementing a solution worth it, or are there negative consequences that outweigh the positive impacts? Understanding what feasible and meaningful solutions are through systematic co-creating of research is important not just so research can make better recommendations, but to identify what questions to ask in the first place. What should one research to better illuminate what are the most important, meaningful, and feasible solutions to violence and how those solutions can be implemented?

For instance, the Kroc IPJ works to reduce violence in Tijuana – an extraordinarily difficult and complex endeavor. Strategies that are not grounded in the experience of those living in Tijuana will be ineffective at best and will potentially do harm to communities that are vulnerable to violence at worst. By working closely with our network of [Kroc Border Fellows](#), the Kroc IPJ develops research initiatives focused on strategies to reduce violence that are feasible, that will do no harm, and that have the potential of being effective in reducing violence in the city.

3) Relationships and Buy-In

Eventually, any knowledge produced through the Learning With process needs to be applied. And given addressing violence is a complex challenge, often involving systems change, it is likely a broad and diverse set of stakeholders will need to apply that knowledge to successfully reduce violence. The Learning With process fosters relationships, communication between stakeholders, and shared understanding of the problems, the solutions, and the evidence. Trusted relationships are also built with the Kroc IPJ, which allows us to work with, to accompany, stakeholders as they make sense of the evidence and better understand how it can be applied in their context. This accompaniment process is crucial in accelerating efforts to leverage evidence to disrupt cycles of violence.

For instance, during the research on recidivism described above, the Kroc IPJ built relationships with key stakeholders in civil society and community based organizations, social service organizations, law enforcement, local government, and advocacy organizations. These relationships created a ready-made audience for the findings of the research. One tangible outcome was that the Kroc IPJ was able to work with its partners to immediately distill findings from the research report and present them to the San Diego Gang Prevention and Intervention Commission to be endorsed and forward to the San Diego City Council.

Ethics, Justice, and Learning With

In addition to a commitment to collaboratively developing evidence, the mission statement of the Kroc IPJ commits the Institute to advancing justice-centered solutions to ending cycles of violence. “Justice-centered” means solutions to cycles of violence that:

- Advance, instead of undermine, human rights;
- Are inclusive and equitable, that do not target or sacrifice certain groups to achieve a short-term reduction in violence; and
- Focus on the goal of allowing all individuals in society to live lives free of both violence and fear.

We believe that evidence grounded in the lived experience of our partners and their communities can play a central role in identifying solutions to cycles of violence that are effective and just.

Long-term relationships and a deep understanding of local dynamics are necessary for the Kroc IPJ to design research that does no harm. This harm can result directly from undertaking research activities that put individuals or groups at risk, or indirectly, through activities that drive conflict and violence. Research efforts can also cause harm when researchers misunderstand violence dynamics in ways that lead them to advocate for solutions that are unjust or harmful. Avoiding such harm is not achieved through a one-time ethics review of a project, or IRB application, but through continued collaboration with community partners.

This engagement with partners can also help illuminate the negative impacts and unjust consequences of potential solutions to violence identified in the research. Is a solution authentically inclusive or will it marginalize certain groups? Will a particular solution help empower peace actors or actors that will drive future violence? Will a potential solution amplify certain narratives that will lay the ground for future violence? A sophisticated and grounded understanding of the dynamics within communities is necessary to answer these questions and identify when potential solutions are unjust and will do harm. Moreover, the relationships we have with partners allow us to center and amplify voices experiencing that harm and who are advocating for more just solutions to violence.

The Kroc IPJ works with a range of partners and each co-creation experience is tailored to the specific needs of the partnership and project. Overall, Learning With requires extensive discussions focused on the power imbalances, equity, inclusion and cultural sensitivity. Authentic co-creation is difficult. Consultations on issues like who should be included in the research process, the best research methods for collecting and analyzing data, and how results are shared, take time and resources. However, investing in building trust and an environment where different types of knowledge are shared and valued equally can yield meaningful results that can be more easily applied in real world situations.

What Research Products Does the Learning With Approach Produce?

The research at the Kroc IPJ emerges out of our partnerships and is designed to be leveraged by our partners. As a result, the Institute does not produce standardized research products or series with set

timelines. The research products are a tool to move change forward. As a result, research products are crafted to meet the goals of the Institute's partnerships, the accompaniment process we undertake with our partners, and the policy and practice goals of our specific initiatives. Depending on those goals, the Institute may produce research reports, academic articles, policy, case studies, action memos, and/or evidence reviews. The Institute also produces a range of shorter written pieces, such as op-eds, as well as multimedia pieces such as videos or podcasts interviews. Sometimes, the Kroc IPJ and its staff is foregrounded in these research products. At other times, it is strategic for the Kroc IPJ to deemphasize its role in the research process.

Conclusion

As should be clear from the sections above, the Learning With approach informs and infuses everything we do at the Kroc IPJ. We are committed to developing both the internal capacity and the external relationships necessary to implement this approach successfully. But we know as well that this is always a work in progress. We are continually working to understand how we can collaborate more effectively and more authentically - always with the goal of truly co-created, actionable learning that makes a real contribution to reducing cycles of violence.