

SPEAKING UP, SPEAKING OUT: GRADUATE STUDENT VOICES

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Kevin Hillman and Joseph Feldman are students in IUPUI's Urban Education Studies doctoral program. They responded to the editors' questions:

Editors: What are your understandings of community engaged scholarship?

As doctoral students, our understanding is influenced and grounded by *collaborative engagement research* as discussed by Post et al. (2016). We referenced their work throughout our response because it helped us to articulate our thoughts. Much of the research literature can be “over the top” for beginning grad students. For example Post et al suggest,

Collaborative engagement research is distinctive in its orientation for the following primary reasons: (a) the recognition that researchers are equally based in the community and in academia and that they are co-researchers who have their own knowledge and expertise base; and (b) the research process's deliberative approach, in that it aims to be fully democratic in an effort to address real-world problems. (pp. 79-80)



Community-engaged scholarship can break down barriers between universities and communities, valuing the knowledge and assets of those present at the table. Viewing community members as experts strengthens the relationship, dispelling the notions of the ivory tower university researcher and the “helpless” community that needs to be saved. This helps in addressing and balancing power dynamics, creating a more equitable environment where community members have a voice in every step of the process. In turn, community members will feel empowered and less coerced, transitioning from the position of test subjects to collaborators. Post et al further state,

Where collaborative engagement teaching and learning transcend the boundaries of the classroom, collaborative engagement research transcends the boundaries of traditional academic research. It involves shared and equitable decision-making that leads to equitable ownership for the research process, which is imperative for meaningful and relevant answers to



research questions. This, in turn, can lead to social change. (pp. 79-80)

Addressing real-world problems through a community-engaged approach is important in combating the stratification that exists in our society. In order to be democratic in addressing these problems, the parties involved should be seen and treated as equal and valued. Being intentional about their presence and role creates an atmosphere for learning and change.

Through the collaborative engagement research process, social and cultural change inherently take place. Social change and cultural change occur as people affected by the research problem become involved in the process because they, by virtue of their lived experience, have a greater knowledge of the problem as well as the possible solutions. Their involvement in the research is necessary so that they might also become part of the resulting change process. (Post et al, pp. 79-80)

Influenced by our understanding of *collaborative engagement research*, we believe that community-engaged scholarship facilitates and informs partnership development and reciprocity between the university and community. These reciprocal relationships help to ensure that those involved have power over the decision making process, which facilitates an end result that is sustainable by the community.

As community members move from subjects of the research to co-researchers and participate fully in the co-creation of knowledge, a resulting shift occurs in the existing hierarchal, academic-centric knowledge production system to more fully recognize the rights that co-investigators have to investigate and analyze their own lived experiences. In sum, collaborative

engagement research combines community-driven priorities, shared equitable decision-making, and social and cultural change with the co-creation of knowledge into a holistic, participatory, action-oriented research process. (Post et al, pp. 79-80)

Community-engaged scholarship, as well as community-engaged research (CER), affords the opportunity to employ theoretical concepts into practice, praxis. Understanding praxis can be a challenge for graduate students, pushing our thinking beyond just “theory into practice” toward “theory into practice being transformative.” Through the transformational approach of praxis graduate students can begin to analyze and think more critically as to how we can make our systems and society socially just.

Editors: What do you need to be prepared to conduct CER?

Students and faculty interested in community-engaged scholarship should approach it with a mindset that is conducive to this type of work. This is often done through intentional relationship building, which helps to engender trust between university and community. Future scholars need to realize that communities can and will identify the problems that are important to them and propose solutions to these problems. Therefore, scholars should not enter the research process from the stance of an expert who holds all of the knowledge and answers. Instead, there should be an openness to listening and learning from the community. Researchers valuing diverse perspectives and demonstrating a willingness to work alongside community members from various backgrounds will include populations whose voices have historically been silenced or excluded, such as linguistic and racially minoritized groups.

In addition to the *ways of thinking* described above, as doctoral students, we also need an understanding gleaned from experienced

community-engaged scholars. Not only do we need access to literature on the topic, but we also need access to faculty that actively partake in community-engaged scholarship in order to further develop our CER abilities and provide us with opportunities to identify how community-engaged concepts can be incorporated into our own research questions. We have come to understand that mentoring relationships with these faculty members are vital to doctoral students, since they can provide us with opportunities to participate in community-engaged research while receiving invaluable guidance and feedback. This would allow us to better understand the relationship between theory, practice and our responsibilities to community.

REFERENCES

Post, M., Ward, E., Longo, N., Saltmarsh, J., Eatman, T., & Levine, P. (2016). *Publicly engaged scholars*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, LLC.