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Brokers of transformation: prioritizing community interests in community-university sustainability research

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Abstract

This paper describes and evaluates a community-driven research project in which Trent University researchers and students have partnered with three local community groups and one regional nonprofit organization to collaboratively research the options and needs for improving active transportation infrastructure in a socio-economically challenged neighbourhood in downtown Peterborough, Ontario. The project was initiated by organizations in our community and the Trent Community Research Centre, a non-profit organization that connects the community and university in research and learning activities, brokered a partnership with faculty at the university.

1. Background: Transformation through community-engaged learning and inquiry

In order to be good institutional citizens, universities should understand the transformative role they serve within their communities. The privileged position of the university in society provides it with resources and expertise to serve the needs of the community alongside the needs of its learners and faculty. Chief among community needs are those of marginalized citizens, particularly those who may not otherwise be able to directly access university resources. The themes of democracy, social justice, activism and educational experience are central to our discussion of community-university engagement as an approach for transformative learning and scholarship.

Collective and collaborative inquiry between researchers and communities requires sustained discussion and reflection so as to discover the discord and harmony between their differing perspectives. Trent University's founding president, Tom Symons, has long advocated for collegial and contemplative inquiry based in conversation, so as to fully tease out the complexities of the problem at hand. "The right answer – there isn't always a right answer. There is the best you can do under the circumstances, or what may be and that is so very often the situation, rather than black or white" (Tom Symons as quoted in Benedickson, 2011, pg. 58).

Community-engaged participatory action research is collaborative, complex, cross-sectoral and interdisciplinary. Academic expertise is used in partnership with local knowledge to respond to real problems, where learning arises from action and reflection (Eyler, 2002). While benefits of this approach are many in theory, a number of challenges exist in practice.

Nurturing and sustaining mutually beneficial community-university partnerships is not easy (Bushouse, 2005; Jacoby, 2003; Stoecker, 2008). First, it can be difficult to get faculty involved. There is an uneasy tension between university tenure and promotion systems and faculty members' interest in community-engaged scholarship (Gelmon et al, 2012). Academic incentives can prevent some university faculty from engaging in research and practice with community stakeholders to say nothing of the fact that university norms do next to nothing to drive for community-engaged scholarship and partnerships.

There can also be a power imbalance with university objectives tend to take priority over community goals (Barr, Reid, & Stoecker, 2008). Community-university engagement has been called a 'charity', which focuses on student learning rather than promotes social change (Marullo & Edwards, 2000; Robinson, 2000). Indeed, universities normally broker and facilitate service learning, internships, and community research projects as opposed to it being driven by the community. Only in rare situations do community groups initiate a community-university partnership. Even in these cases, the resources of a university typically outweigh those of the nonprofit community groups. This invariably means that university needs tends to take priority over community development (Stoecker & Tyron, 2009). The growth in community-engaged partnerships has done little to alleviate the struggle that most nonprofit groups have finding volunteers and, worse, the literature suggests nonprofits often view service learning as a drain on their resources (Bushouse, 2005). The reality is that it is often the nonprofit staff providing educational services to students (Stoecker & Tyron, 2009).

Despite these challenges, we feel that – when properly designed and implemented – projects such as the one described in our paper have the potential to be transformative for the communities served by universities as well as the students who are involved (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). They can also be transformative for the faculty researchers involved by changing the nature of scholarship valued by the university stakeholders “so that [scholarship] means more than research, and engagement is the means for scholarship to flourish” Van de Ven (2007, pg. 9). We argue that environmental scholarship requires researchers to engage authentically with our local communities for it to flourish.

1.1 Experiential education

Environmental Studies is by definition an integrated, interdisciplinary effort to explore human relationships with nature. But it is also an applied field of study, where complex problems require integrated and innovative solutions. There are forms of knowledge that are best taught and understood in specific

contexts; an example would be learning a new language within a community of native speakers versus from a book or recording. Environmental issues are one of these forms of knowledge, where context, culture and place influence our understanding of human interactions with nature. Environmental scholarship and learning, then, requires us to undertake place-based investigations, where ideas are concrete and tangible (Orr, 2002; Sobel, 2004).

The two ideas of integrated and place-based learning come together in the notion of experiential education. John Dewey's 1938 publication, *Experience and Education*, promoted the power of experience in linking the 'static' knowledge taught in the classroom with real world situations, and indeed believed in the right for pupils to be engaged in the development of what they were being taught. His belief in a democratic educational environment, an idea important for this discussion, stemmed from his earliest work, including the 1916 publication, *Democracy and Education*.

Our project is sympathetic with Dewey's ideas of education. We argue that research and teaching in Environmental Studies can be greatly enhanced by experiential learning placed within a community as it creates places of understanding within the space of intangible, abstract concepts, and a rejection of traditional notions of teaching and learning as absorbing facts and information (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Lave and Wenger argue that learning is fundamentally a social process. Their concept of legitimate peripheral participation refers to the idea that learners participate in a community of practitioners, leading to a fully integrated, situated understanding (Lave and Wenger 1991). There is also a long history of social justice and democratic thought in experiential education. Direct experience becomes a powerful best teacher about the structure of society, and can result in social reform and change (Warren 2005, pg.90).

2. Environmental sustainability

Environmental sustainability “*recognizes and prioritizes ecological limits; supports a systems-level analysis of the dialectic relationship between the environment, economy, and society; includes a strong concern for equity, fairness, and participatory, democratic decision-making; and demands employment of the precautionary principle in our scientific and technological endeavours*” (Hatt, Davidson, and Lock 2005, pg. 15).

Progress towards environmental sustainability has been slow over the past five decades of environmental scholarship. The climate continues to change, biologists tell us of a coming massive loss of biodiversity, and water is ever more precious. Environmentalism is too often framed as a battle, say, between jobs and the environment. Business develops, environmentalists oppose, government regulates (when it's not pulled in other directions by the vested interests of commerce). It seems that we slip so easily into our defined roles and interests.

We argue that environmental scholarship needs to look different going forward. Environmental theory and practice need to design new systems of

governance and institutions that guide our individual and collective decisions about natural resources and the environment. This might include innovative policies, regulatory changes, financial supports (taxation, acquisition, spending), human resource capacity, organizational learning, and institutional design that nurture and facilitate collective action on environmental & sustainability issues.

What might be some of the characteristics of this new scholarship? First, sustainability requires integration across disciplines, sectors, organizations and issues: an interdisciplinary approach. A central character of sustainability is to seek win-win outcomes for the environment, the economy, and society. For example, policies and investments that reduce traffic congestion that involve modal shifts away from single-occupancy vehicles are beneficial for the environment, industrial productivity, and quality of life. Second, local solutions to environmental problems are best, something that is sometimes referred to as subsidiarity. Indeed, the 1992 Rio Declaration suggested that environmental problems are most effectively addressed through political participation “at the lowest, most accessible, and policy-relevant level.” Third, we need to become better at taking “collective action” to tackle environmental problems. Mancur Olson (1965) examined some of the challenges of collective action, namely that members of the public with narrow and deep interests will normally organize and trump shallow and unorganized members of the public. Environmental policies tend to benefit a diffuse and passive public, while stirring up opposition from vested interests most impacted by new policies. Large groups have a hard time organizing to do something collectively because there are times when a minority interest (such as a resource industry) can make collective action by a large group (such as the general public), difficult even if most people in the large group agree on the need for action. In contrast, small groups of people are more easily organized and able to advance their common interests, which is reflected in the research literature on how communities can best manage natural resources (Armitage, 2005).

Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom further developed these ideas and argued that responsibility for governing common resources – like the climate, rests not with a single level of government, but rather within nested tiers of collectives from the lowest level up to the entire interconnected system (Ostrom, 1990). Focusing on innovative collaborative models to target a variety of scales (e.g., individual, street, neighbourhood, city, region) may improve environmental conservation. Cross-sectoral collaborations might also open up deliberative participatory approaches shared vision of sustainability.

Taking these three ideas together suggests that collective action on environmental problems likely requires small groups that can work locally across issues, sectors and organizations. In many ways, these sound like organizations like universities, NGOs, faith communities, museums, and service groups. But these small, local groups have to operate within a governance system which functions effectively at multiple levels, within an overall framework. “Each with autonomy but each exposed to information, sanctioning, and actions from below and above” (Ostrom, 2009, pg. 258).

In practical terms, a big missing piece is the lack of human and financial capacity for civil society in local contexts to manage complex community initiatives and interact effectively with higher levels of governance, particularly when local, provincial, federal, or global priorities may not align. We see these challenges in land-use planning, energy planning, natural resource management, and transportation planning. In terms of capacity building, university research and training play a critical role in the processes by which actors and institutions assume new roles in these complex community initiatives (Molnar et al, 2010; Elwood, 2004). Universities like Trent fit in this have a very special and unique role in designing and helping to build local capacity that can facilitate nested levels of governance. As institutions, universities are placed in our communities yet connected globally to scholarship and ideas. In addition, Trent has a long-standing tradition of interdisciplinary research and teaching (Benidickson, 2011) as well as a history of community-engaged scholarship and teaching (Whillans and Wadland, 2014).

2.1 Case description⁶⁴

The research project we are collectively engaged in seeks to reimagine how we can better share streets and sidewalks between pedestrians, cyclists and motor vehicle drivers (Adkins et al, 2012; Dill, 2009; Heinen, 2010; Kennedy et al, 2005). More specifically, how can we encourage more people to travel actively, enhance the safety of residents, foster stronger links between neighbours and promote a sense of inclusion within the community? The project is particularly interested in including those often left out of the planning process in the research (Booher, 2008; Finney and Rishbeth, 2006; Larsen et al, 2014).

There are three components to the project:

1. *Understand*: A 'Neighbourhood Portrait' that defines how people move within the community and contains an evaluation of the local needs for increased active transportation.
2. *Explore planning and design solutions for the neighbourhood*. A defined 'Neighbourhood Vision' for the area that builds on local needs, evaluated with the help of engaged citizens.
3. *Build the neighbourhood's future*. The participatory development of a 'Neighbourhood Plan' that identifies and integrates political and planning opportunities to help realize the goals identified by the local vision.

We are currently in the neighbourhood portrait phase of the project. While the details of second and third components of the workplan remain loosely defined and flexible, there is a well-articulated terms of reference for the project (see Appendix for summary table). This is critical as there are eight organizations involved and fifteen people who have attended the steering committee meetings. The project has engaged a Trent graduate student

⁶⁴ Further information about the project can be found online at <http://activenighbourhoods.tcat.ca/neighbourhoods/stewart-street-peterborough/>

(Nasca) who is integrating her thesis research into the project and will assist the community as they develop the project. The graduate thesis research will use a wider and higher-level lens to evaluate the project's outcomes, thereby determining how this type of planning initiative might become institutionalized. The project has also engaged a class of first-year Environmental & Resource Studies/Science students in a cyclist and pedestrian documentation component. This service-learning opportunity will see between 80 and 100 students participate in an annual cyclist and pedestrian count across the city of Peterborough. Lastly, a third-year class of 30 students, Sustainable Innovation, has worked with the community groups to research participatory approaches to budgeting and planning that are of relevance to both the project and to the course. Both the research and public engagement activities are following the participatory action research methods articulated in *SAS²* (Chevalier and Buckles, 2008) and *Participatory Action Research* (Chevalier and Buckles, 2013). A Peterborough-based community of practice around these methods has been developed and nurtured over the past few years by the Trent Community Research Centre. Serendipitously, the Toronto Coalition for Active Transportation partners have also use the Chevalier and Buckles methods in their previous work. A common approach has been important in building synergy among the partners. Funding for the project has come from four different sources and will provide resources to both community and university partners. Not all partners within the project are adequately remunerated for their time at this point and the steering committee continues to seek funding for these partners. External funding has recently been identified as a key success factor for university partnerships around urban sustainability (Trencher et al, 2014).

3. Discussion and Conclusion

Overcoming the challenges in community- engaged research requires care and thoughtful planning. Based on our experience with this project, we suggest five other critical factors for successfully establishing this type of project. First, trust between community partners and university partners must be nurtured and sustained. A foundation of trust is the essential building block for any productive relationship. In our case, many of the partners involved in this project have collaborated previously in other community and university activities. In short, trust can take years to build and requires a sustained commitment from all partners. Second, resources are needed to provide the human and physical resources for each partner to meaningfully engage in the project. External funding was found to support the project first through a local application (GreenUp) to a national project (Active Neighbourhoods Canada) so that the community group secured modest external support. Funding for the university contribution was then secured through an existing Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada research grant that dealt with university-community partnerships (CFICE, 2015). This seven-year grant is led locally by the Trent Community Research Centre and is meant to fund community groups and graduate students in community-engaged research. Last, GreenUp successfully sought further funding to support their involvement and support the involvement of people from the neighbourhood through a community-granting program (Ontario Trillium Foundation). Third, unambiguous terms of reference that outline the roles and responsibilities of

each partner, along with some willingness to adapt to changing circumstances, need to be negotiated at the outset. This took a significant amount of time in our case, nearly six months. Fourth, the organizations involved need to value, or at least tolerate, their faculty and community partners being involved in community-university research. For Trent University, there is a tradition of community service and engaged research. There is also an informal program of faculty mentoring and support to enable new faculty to become engaged with the local community. This is not to suggest that Trent couldn't do more to support community-engaged research but rather to highlight that the institution is carefully considering how to encourage it within or academic norms. Last, establishing an effective community-university partnership, one that might transform university scholarship and learning at the same time that begins to transform communities requires a good deal of serendipity. We feel fortunate to be working together on this important project.

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5. Appendix: Summary of partner roles and contributions to project

Partnerships and Roles:

Organization	Description of Contribution
Toronto Coalition for Active Transportation (TCAT)	TCAT will be able to resource two Project Managers to contribute to this project.
GreenUP	GreenUP will contribute staff resourcing to this project, both directly toward the implementation of the ANC project and additionally to host and support the graduate student researcher and other supportive research components.
City of Peterborough	The City of Peterborough will contribute in-kind resourcing to this project. To the extent that this project aligns with ongoing environmental assessment processes, additional resources may be available.
Peterborough County-City Health Unit	The Peterborough County-City Health Unit will contribute in-kind resourcing to the project. To the extent that this project aligns with AT-supportive policy development, additional resources and capacity may be available.
B!KE	B!KE: the Peterborough Community Cycling Hub will contribute in-kind resourcing to the project. This may include staffing to support events and direct interventions in the project neighbourhood.
Trent Community Research Centre	The Trent Community Research Centre will contribute in-kind staffing to support the academic research partnerships occurring as part of this project. Additionally, the TCRC will provide staff capacity to support the CFICE funded components of this project and any related evaluative work required.
Trent University	Trent University will provide funding for a graduate student in the Masters of Sustainability Studies programme whose research will contribute to the ANC project. Trent will also provide staffing capacity to support the graduate student, facilitate the other collaborative research and/or service learning projects, and to manage the funds related to the federal SSRCH-CURA CFICE grant.