



Community Engaged Research: Student and Community Perspectives

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Abstract

Engaged scholarship is defined by Stanton (2008) as research that partners university scholarly resources with those in the public and private sectors to enrich knowledge, address and help solve critical social issues, and contribute to the public good. To be truly engaged and of high quality, engagement must take place in the development of the purpose, throughout the research process and in the compilation of the research product. It includes research that incorporates only a few elements of community-engagement, for example having the researchers control the research with the community in more of a consultative role, to research in which both are equal partners throughout the process. This paper will report on a community engaged research course. Feedback from the community agencies and the students involved in the course will be examined in terms of the level of engagement and whether the students were able to make a contribution to the organization.

Introduction

There is a growing literature on the challenges inherent in universities and communities engaging in community based research (CBR). CBR seeks to democratize knowledge by validating multiple sources of knowledge and promoting the use of multiple methods of discovery and dissemination with the goal of social action (Strand, 2003). Some of the challenges include finding sufficient funding (Seifer & Calleson, 2004; Savan, 2004), systemic barriers in the academy (Ahmed, 2004), conforming to university time lines (Hyde & Meyer, 2004), whether the research is truly community initiated and driven (Flicker, Savan, Grath, Kolenda, Mildenerger, 2007; Minkler, 2004, 2005), the challenges of negotiating MOUs and research protocols (Minkler, 2004; Moretti, Leadbeater & Marshall, 2006), managing the ethics review process (Boser, 2006) and negotiating ownership and dissemination of the research results (Seifer & Calleson, 2004). Conceptualizing university/ community research projects as

community engaged research, thereby including a slightly different set of assumptions, will make the actual process more transparent. This paper will draw from the growing literature on community engaged scholarship, describe a university based research course that involves students in community engaged research, report on an evaluation of this course from the perspectives of the community agencies as well as the students, and inform academics who plan to include community engaged research into their coursework.

Definition of Terms

Engaged scholarship is defined by Stanton (2008) as research that partners university scholarly resources with those in the public and private sectors to enrich knowledge, address and help solve critical social issues, and contribute to the public good. To be truly engaged and of high quality, engagement must take place in the development of the purpose, throughout the research process, and in the compilation of the research product. In relation to purpose, Stanton (2008) evaluates quality in terms of whether the purpose of the research benefits the community directly or indirectly and whether the findings are intended to “work in particular contexts with particular people to achieve a particular purpose” (p.24). The standard he proposes for an engaged process is the level of collaboration that is sufficient or appropriate at each stage of the research process. Lastly, in terms of product, Stanton (2008) envisions a range of products where the results lead to concrete action, changed practice, changed policies, and various communication vehicles including academic, popular and community specific publications.

Hyde and Meyer (2004) conceptualize a continuum from participatory action to conventional research with most CBR projects situated at different points on the continuum. They propose a variety of factors that affect the participatory nature of a project including the nature of the problem to be explored, the skill and training of the researcher, the environmental context and the desires of the community (Hyde & Meyer, 2004). Other researchers have found that multiple methods, from a logic model to participatory action research, are usually essential to meet the needs expressed by community participants (Mulroy, 2004). Stoecker has noted that the “community could be social service agencies rather than grass root residents, and collaboration could simply mean obtaining approval for a researcher-defined project” (p.36).

McDonald (2007) conceptualizes a similar continuum in a slightly different manner. She uses the term community-engaged as applied to research, to conceptualize a continuum that includes the full spectrum of approaches which involve the community in the research process. Her continuum includes research that incorporates only a few elements of community-engagement, for example having the researchers control the research with the community in more of a consultative role, to research in which both are equal partners throughout the process. The extent of the collaboration, when it occurs in the research process and the relationships among researchers and community organizations, may be very different from

project to project. The students in this course have undertaken research projects situated at different points along this continuum.

Community Based Research and the Academy

Universities have incorporated community based research as a means to engage the community and educate students, though the literature shows different benefits for the different stakeholders. Community based research has been incorporated into research courses (Anderson, 2002; Hyde & Meyer, 2004; Stuart & Whitmore, 2006; Peter & Gray, 2007), other course work (for example environmental studies and political science courses at my university use a form of CBR as service learning) (Bzruzy & Segal, 1996; Bird, Ambiee & Kuzin, 2007; Andrée, 2008), non-course connected student research assistantships with community agencies (Savan, 2004) and collaborations through a university-based Community Partnership Centre (Rogge & Roche, 2004). When CBR has been incorporated into a research course, one of the major benefits is making research real for students, (Chapdelaine & Chapman, 1999;; Hyde & Meyer, 2004). A number of studies have shown the positive outcomes for students from these initiatives, for example creating a greater appreciation for research (Strand, 2000; Eylar, Giles, Stenson & Gray, 2001; Hayes, 2006). However, there is little research into the outcomes for the community organizations and while some research shows that positive outcomes appear negligible, (Johnson & Rouse, 2007) other research shows that harm to communities, (Sullivan, Kone, Senturia, Chrisman, Ciske, & Kreiger, 2001).

One argument has been made that the more collaborative the research process is between the university and community partners then the more effective it can be, both as scholarship and as service to society (Arches, 2007; Stanton, 2008). Flicker (2008) found that there were benefits in engaging in CBPR (Community Based Participatory Research) in terms of the quality of the research and sense of accomplishment of the various stakeholders, including community members. However, the costs of engaging in CBPR include the extra amount of time to complete projects, the extra burden on overloaded stakeholders, and the existence of confusion around decision making.

This project examines the impact of a research course that incorporates community engagement with the intent to address the gap in knowledge about the effects of such research projects on the community with whom they are engaged.

Description of the Course

For the past three years I have co-taught the required research course to Masters of Social Work students at a Canadian University. This full year course is structured so that students in small groups engage in research with community agencies. In July, my co-instructor and I send out a letter inviting community organizations to submit a request for research. A broad

range of proposals have been submitted that can be situated at various points along the continuum of engagement that McDonald (2007) describes. At one end of the continuum would be program evaluation where the community agency, such as a community health center, requests students to design the research protocol and carry out the research with a low level of consultation. Mid-continuum would include community based needs assessment spearheaded, in one instance, by residents of a subsidized housing complex who participated in a community house. They might provide consultation during every step of the research but have the students carry out the actual interviews and analyze the data. Lastly, we receive proposals for true participatory action research where the community members are trained to be researchers and are actively involved in every stage of the research process.

In August, the requests are reviewed and we select a short list of projects based on appropriateness in terms of learning opportunities, and academic timelines. Preference is given to organizations with few resources to meet their research needs. In September, the students in the class are invited to select from the approved projects. The research projects must be completed by the end of the winter term (the end of March). All of the students will have had at least one previous research course as part of their undergraduate degree, though for the mature students this course may have been taken a number of years ago. We design the course so that the students become an engaged self reflexive community (Stuart & Whitmore, 2006) themselves. The student groups get feedback from their peers during check-ins and in response to presentations about the various phases of their research, they receive weekly supervision from the instructors, each student individually completes two reflexive journals describing their assumptions and possible biases at different stages of the research.

At the initial meeting between the agency, the students and the instructor a contract is developed which spells out the details of the project, including specifying the research question, deciding on the research design, establishing the data gathering process, determining which tasks will be undertaken and by whom, as well as the timeline. This is consistent with Stanton's (2008) view of the purpose and process of engaged research that the research design and outcomes of the research and how the research will be used are negotiated between the university and the community. The research designs range from employing feminist methods to pure logic models. Ownership of research products is discussed at this meeting but at times this can take additional negotiation. The contract incorporates concepts of integrating all stakeholders in the research process, (Brun, 2005).

The team then develops a detailed research proposal for the approval of the community organization and the instructors. The proposals are presented in class for discussion and feedback. The teams also develop an ethics review proposal for approval by the Ethic Review Board of the University. In January, once the proposal has cleared ethics, the teams start gathering and analyzing data. The teams then write the final report which is presented in class for discussion and feedback. The final step involves the teams presenting their final report to the organization. The student teams collaborate with their community partners in accordance with the agreed upon level of contact negotiated in the initial contract. There is an additional

meeting in January with the instructor, student team and community organization to check if any aspects of the initial contract need to be renegotiated.

Methodology

This study was carried out from 2006 to 2008 in order to assess the outcomes for community agencies and students from participation in this community engaged research course. Community agency partners answered open ended questions over the phone that queried feedback about the research relationship with the university and the students, and whether they felt the information they received as a result of the research was useful and how they would use the information. An interview guide approach was used in the interviews; so that the order and wording of questions were flexible and allowed to emerge through conversation (Patton, 2003). A convenience sample (Berg, 2007) of 15 out of a total of 22 projects completed in 2006-2008 generated our responses. We did not receive responses from three organizations because the contact people were no longer employed by the organization. High staff turnover is a common problem in social service organizations (Colton & Roberts, 2007; Glissen, Dukes & Green, 2006). We can assume that the research is of limited value to the organization if no one was assigned to follow-up with the project and receive the report from the students. Some organizations were involved in more than one research project in which case one person gave us feedback about a number of projects. We have had a very broad range of participating organizations. Half of the organizations were multi service health and community resource centers. The rest included a variety of agencies servicing clients with developmental, mental health, health, immigration and addictions issues.

A focus group was held each year (2007 and 2008) with the students. They were asked similar questions about the relationship between the agency and the instructors and the anticipated utility of the research. As well students were asked about ideas for improving the course and what they feel that they had gained by participating in the course. About half of the students enrolled in the course each year attended the voluntary focus group. Pizza and soft drinks were supplied as an incentive to participate. The focus group was held once the final grades for the course were submitted so that the students would not feel that they had to answer in a positive manner to receive a better grade. In spite of this precaution it can be assumed that the student's responses would tend to be more positive than negative. The students appeared to feel comfortable giving the instructors numerous constructive ideas for improving the course.

Thematic analysis a qualitative data analysis strategy used to identify common themes or patterns that are prevalent in narrative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used in this exploratory study. Thematic analysis is useful in analyzing narrative material from in-depth interviews and focus groups, (Dudley, 2009). We employed an etic perspective in identifying categories in our analysis; the categories were identified by the researchers (Rubin & Babbie, 2008). Two researchers identified codes in the transcripts, which were then grouped into themes. The relationships between the themes were explored. The two researchers independently evaluated

the themes in order to insure inter-rater reliability, (Dudley, 2009). The University Ethics Review Board allowed this project to go through an expedited review, solely by the ethics committee coordinator, as it was seen, at that time, as part of course evaluation..

Findings

Community and student perspectives have been examined in this paper, in terms of the quality of the relationship between the student and the agency and whether the students were able to make a contribution to the organization. I have also addressed the issues raised in Seifer (2006) about balancing power among partners and how to sustain these partnerships. Some of the findings confirm previous research and others extend the thinking about community engaged research.

Community Perspectives

Several themes emerged from the community partners about the benefits and drawbacks of this partnership. The benefits included the concrete ways that the organizations made use of the research reports they received as well as knowledge, skill and technology exchange. The drawbacks included difficulties in communication that led to issues of power and control between the partners, the students and the instructors. The community contact people were generally content with the quality of the relationship with the university and students. They appreciated the first meeting that the instructor attended and requested during the 2007 round of interviews that the instructors attend a meeting in January as well. This change was made prior to soliciting feedback in 2008. The importance of the instructors' attendance at the first meeting was largely in managing expectations. Many of the students had overly ambitious ideas of what could be accomplished. The instructors' role was to ensure that what was agreed to be realistic in terms of academic timelines, research methodology and equally important met the needs of the organization. Respondents stated that "it was helpful to clarify the nuances of each [stakeholder's] perspective"; that the meeting "laid the groundwork for the project" and "got [us] talking about concrete things that the students wanted to research and to set limits on the students (not enough time to interview a hundred people)."

The community contact people also generally felt that the research produced was useful to the organization. All of the participating organizations made use of some or all of the information in the final report that the students presented to them, thus achieving Stanton's (2008) standard of quality engaged research. Several stated that they would integrate the information into funding applications. Others responded that they planned to use the findings to create new programs or in staff and volunteer training. Some organizations incorporated the data into conference presentations and another organization planned to use the data to refine its program. One research project was featured on a local radio show. The students were interviewed and publicized the work of the organization, the results of their research, and the needs of black youth in the public school system. Two years later, a new program that had

been established as a result of this research was publicized on the same radio program. Examples of some of the responses about the use of the findings are as follows:

"We will be using the findings in our application for funding from the ministry."

"We will take the results to the volunteers to discuss what can be done to address the challenges raised."

"The literature review was helpful because we received up to date information on why we are doing what they are doing."

"The Chinese community was not even on our radar."

The organization contact people were asked for suggestions for improving the collaboration and the research process. Some of the research participants felt that there were communication difficulties. These suggestions depended on where the project fell on the continuum of participatory and conventional research. A couple of respondents said, "We would have wanted more check ins with the students" and suggested including a more detailed schedule of meetings with students in the initial contract. Other comments related to a desire for greater input: "We would have liked more input in the development of the final report; We would have liked more discussion on the interpretation of the data". This comment is particularly noteworthy as it differs from previous studies in which community organizations did not want input into the data analysis because they felt it would bias the analysis (Hyde & Meyer, 2004). This highlights tensions in community engaged research not previously discussed in the literature. Community partners may start at one point on Hyde and Meyer's (2004) continuum of engagement and may move to wanting to be more or less involved as they become engaged in the research process. Some partners became increasingly concerned about the unfavorable results from the program evaluation and how funders might view these results. Secondly, the critical analysis that is emphasized in academia can be threatening for some community partners.

General Feedback:

"Students from the MSW program have been involved in this program from its inception in 2006. They have assisted in its design, in the creation of the wellness manual, in the running of the sessions, and in its evaluation. A research group completed a more formal program evaluation of the wellness sessions. Without the participation of the School of Social Work, I think we never would have come this far in the program development for this award winning project."

Student Perspectives

The themes related to the benefits from a community engaged research course included skills development and improved chances for employment post MSW. The themes related to

drawbacks included concerns about the workload for a course with a high level of community engagement and problems in communication that led to issues of power and control between the partners, students and instructors. Students expressed concerns about being able to accomplish everything in two semesters, suggesting that we should “drop at least one of the reflective journals.” They recommended sending out information to students during the summer to prepare them for the course.

Some students stated that they felt pressure from their agencies to produce positive results since the agency had such a great need for the information being collected. When doing program evaluation or other documentation that would be used to justify funding, the students felt that the agencies lacked objectivity and that this was problematic.

“I wanted the data to produce results that would not only help our principle investigator but would also make our research worthwhile. To some degree, whether conscious or unconscious, I feel this effected my data collection.”

It is important to remember that students were vulnerable because they wanted good grades, were concerned about their reputation in the community, and often hoped to be employed by community agency they were collaborating with. This combination can translate into a perceived lack of power in any negotiations between the students and the community agency. Seifer (2006) discusses the need to balance power among partners and to build community and campus capacity to engage each other as partners. Balancing the student’s perceived power and community perceived power needs to be part of this equation.

Some students perceived the desire of the organization to have a participatory role in the analysis and discussion of the research as either a lack of trust in their capabilities or as potentially jeopardizing the results. This was linked with the pressure for positive results. One concern was that by having the agency involved in the data analysis they would exert more of this pressure. Their fear was that any negative comments about the services from service users would not be given proper consideration. Students were also concerned about maintaining the confidentiality of the participants if the social workers who had provided the service reviewed transcripts and helped identify themes in the data. These tensions appeared to exist more with agencies that needed to establish their department’s credibility with data or were in dire need for additional government funding. The students were directed to express their concerns to their partners but often wanted their instructors to mediate these conversations. I will return to this in the conclusion section.

The students also had concerns about the agency’s understanding of the ethical procedures they studied and followed. Strand (2000) believes that her students learned more about designing ethical research procedures by these occurrences than they could ever learn in a textbook. However, one consequence was that the students felt the need to exert more control over the research process. One student in this study suggested that we “better inform agencies about research ethics and invite them to attend the lecture about ethics” given by the

coordinator of our university ethics committee. One group was concerned about the gate keeping role the agency played in recruiting participants for the research project and questioned whether the participation was truly voluntary, in spite of the fact that the research protocol was approved by the agency research ethics committee.

"My own perspectives during some of the interviews that I conducted were that the participants may have felt that they had to be involved, and a few of them appeared very uncomfortable. This could have been for any number of reasons, but I could not help feeling as if they understood that they had to participate."

Most of the students felt that this was an extremely useful educational experience. They felt that research was demystified for them and that they were more likely to engage in research in their social work practice than they would have been if they hadn't taken this course. Students who were not doing a master's thesis felt that this experience will benefit them if they decide down the road to further their education with a PhD.

"The learning experience in this class has been priceless. I will be able to take the skills and knowledge gained from this project and continue research in other areas of social work. I have spent most of my social work career fearing research, thinking that it was a task that was too daunting and unrealistic for me to pursue. I have found that I have become quite passionate about research and am able to see how much research can make a difference. Having this learning opportunity will make it so that I can reflect on how to improve methods of research, and helped me realize my preferences in the style of research I want to conduct. This has been a very exciting opportunity and I am grateful."

"I will begin by commenting that this has been and continues to be a tremendous experience. I feel the collaboration with the community on a research project is a wonderful way to enhance our research skills while networking in the community. This project has given me the opportunity to see a side of social work I am not familiar with."

Figure 1 lists the benefits to the stakeholders gained by participation.

Student	Community Agency	University
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Develop reseach skills •Deeper understanding of CER- its benefits and challanges •Develop relations hship with agency •Employment with agency •Improve employment opportunities •Conference presentations •Media Exposure •If not doing athesis have something in CV related to engaging in research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Funding proposals to maintain or improve funding •Documentation for funders of meeting program objectives •Change programs based on information from program evaluation •Volunteer training •Improved relationship with broader community •Media Exposure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Engagement with the community •Fufill responsibility to serve community

Figure 1: Benefits to Students, Community Agencies and the University of Community Engaged Research

Conclusion

There were limitations in this study including the fact that the evidence from community partners was limited to phone interviews. While this information can be seen as anecdotal evidence from organizational representatives who may have an interest in maintaining good relations with the instructors so that they will engage in future partnerships, they were also invested in improving the ongoing process and relationship so that future collaborations would be more satisfying. Though all of the students complained about the workload, they also agreed that this course offers them a tremendous learning opportunity which provides them with marketable skills. More than one group was able to present the results of their research at a conference which can launch an academic career. Others stated this course made them feel more comfortable engaging in research as professional social workers.

The community saw this course as enabling them to carry out research that is required by their funders and as increasing the agency’s capacity for funding. The School of Social Work sees this as a mutually beneficial partnership between university and the community. One of the goals of community engaged research is to share power and control of decision making throughout the research process rather than domination of the process by the researcher (Strand, 2000). However this evaluation showed that students do not always feel that they have power in the research process. Shiu-Thornton (2003) poses a number of questions that need to be explored in CBPR (community based participatory research) that interrogate how diversity

intersects with power differentials. By addressing these questions the process can become a true partnership. Having the students and their community partnerships identify and discuss “their socially and culturally constructed perspectives and methods for performing research and the ways in which their own professional socialization to performing research may facilitate or be a barrier to performing CBPR” (p. 1362) may help to diffuse these tensions. The tensions between some community organizations and the students seemed to be more present in community organizations who requested program evaluation than in those who requested needs assessment. The former had more of a need to establish their department’s credibility with data that would contribute to best practices. There were more tensions in organizations that moved from where they were originally situated on Hyde and Meyer’s (2004) continuum from wanting less participation to wanting more. There were the fewest tensions where the original understanding was that the students would engage in PAR. In order to sustain these community university partnerships these issues need to be better addressed in the initial meeting between the team, organization and instructor, as well in the course content.

There are institutional barriers to community engaged research partnerships. Some have been noted in the literature. The workload for faculty is very heavy (Schwartz & van de Sande, 2008). This includes administrative work; time to meet with students and agencies, time to run interference and re-negotiate with agencies, and time to negotiate group dynamics in student groups. Other studies have noted that an institutional barrier to community university research partnerships is the extra resources required for the development and maintenance of the partnerships, for the evaluation of off-campus student work, and lack of funding for applied and community based research (Savan, 2004). Negotiating the ethics approval process has been noted by other researchers as an institutional barrier (Hyde & Meyer, 2004). While this is certainly time consuming, over the three years that this course has been offered, streamlined ethics forms have been developed and the research ethics coordinator has spent a great deal of time helping the students through the process.

Time constraints and lack of curriculum flexibility have been noted as problematic by other researchers (Hyde & Meyer, 2004; Mulroy, 2004). Our research course does not have much flexibility since students need to complete the project by the end of the winter term while they are concurrently taking other. Time pressures contribute to an increase in students’ anxiety and provide a disincentive to complete participation by organizations. It is challenging to implement a true participatory action model (PAR) in the academic time frame. The social action component is often the part of the PAR model that does not get fully realized with tight time lines.

Soliciting feedback from our community partners and incorporating their feedback into concrete changes in the course structure is one means of sustaining community partnerships and encouraging community engaged research. Evaluations such as the one discussed in this paper will continue so that this remains a reflexive process that continues to generate research which is useful to the community agencies and also provide an educational experience for

students. Stanton asks “How thick is the collaboration?” Conceptualizing the research as engaged allows for more freedom in terms of the product of the research and more transparency in the process. As the course continues, negotiating the level of community involvement that the students feel comfortable with and that the agency feels comfortable with is an on-going process. This course meets the standard, as described by Stanton, of engaged research. In his terms, the collaboration is “thick.” While there are barriers and challenges, the benefits to the community and to the students outweigh the difficulties.

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- ✓ **Biography:** Karen Schwartz, (PhD, Columbia University, 1996) has taught at Carleton University in the School of Social Work since 1999. Her areas of practice and research are in community based research, field education, mental health and social work pedagogy. Karen has fostered numerous community-university partnerships including helping multicultural organizations facilitate having their community members accepted into and succeed in the school of social work. For the past three years she has taught a research course where students engage in community based research while learning research methods.

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