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COMMUNITY-BASED EDUCATOR

M. Tanya Brann-Barrett and Janis Timm-Bottos

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PREDICAMENTS OF THE ACADEMIC COMMUNITY-BASED EDUCATOR

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Abstract

Many academic educators who hope to contribute to socially just community building recognize that working in partnerships with people and organizations outside the academy is important. Working within publicly funded universities and engaging in community-based work, however, require juggling responsibilities to multiple stakeholders. In this article, we present reflections on predicaments we encounter as academic community-based educators as we balance obligations, relationship responsibilities, and overcome expectations that affect our work. We overview our educative projects and share examples of predicaments we encounter. We offer preliminary interpretations of what predicaments tell us about how power plays upon our practice and views of scholarship that may help us disrupt it. We contend that broad and inclusive perceptions of scholarship are required to allow space for community-based educators and their partners to critically engage in community building that supports all society.

Résumé

Plusieurs formatrices et formateurs universitaires qui cherchent à contribuer au développement communautaire en adoptant une perspective de justice sociale reconnaissent qu'il est important de travailler en partenariat avec les gens et les organisations à l'extérieur de l'académie. Cela dit, pour travailler avec les universités publiques et pour s'engager dans le travail communautaire, il faut gérer ses responsabilités envers diverses parties prenantes. Dans cet article, nous présentons des réflexions sur les défis que nous, à titre de formatrices et formateurs en milieu communautaire, rencontrons en cherchant l'équilibre entre les obligations, les responsabilités relationnelles et les attentes en matière de résultats qui ont une incidence sur notre travail. Nous offrons une interprétation préliminaire de ce que révèlent ces défis sur le rôle du pouvoir dans notre pratique ainsi que des perspectives sur la production du savoir qui pourraient nous aider à perturber ce pouvoir. Nous

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affirmons que des perceptions larges et inclusives de la production du savoir sont nécessaires pour que les formatrices et formateurs en milieu communautaire, et leurs partenaires, puissent poursuivre un engagement critique dans le développement communautaire si critique pour l'ensemble de la société.

Introduction

Many academic educators who hope to contribute to socially just community building recognize that working in partnerships with people and organizations outside the academy can be invaluable. Working within publicly funded universities and engaging in community-based work, however, require juggling responsibilities to multiple stakeholders (Boyer, 1990; see also Jeffrey, Findlay, Martz, & Clarke, 2014). Attending to varied expectations of institutions, funders, students, and community citizens, many educators find themselves immersed in predicaments. While uncomfortable, critical examinations of predicaments arising from negotiating community and university commitments are helpful. They reveal assumptions that shape how we work. They also point us to notions of scholarship that influence our educative practice. Here, we present reflections on predicaments we encounter as academic community-based educators as we balance obligations, relationship responsibilities, and outcome expectations that affect our work. To begin, we give an overview our educative projects and share examples of predicaments we encounter. We then offer preliminary interpretations of what predicaments tell us about how power plays upon our practice and views of scholarship that may help us disrupt it. We contend that broad and inclusive perceptions of scholarship are required to allow space for community-based educators and their partners to critically engage in community building that supports *all* society.

Our Educative Work

Tanya's Story

I have worked at a small university in Atlantic Canada for 24 years. The broad aim of my work is to inform and implement lifelong educational policies and practices that address life chances for young people living in economically challenged regions. I teach human communication, drawing extensively from cultural and educational studies. In the community, I deliver communication training programs for children, youth, and adults. I also offer communication training to non-profit organizations, community groups, and government agencies.

I engage in community-based research that examines with youth and young adults their experiences and ideas about community and engagement. This research suggests that many learned connotations of what constitutes *community engagement* are narrowly defined. Thus, some ways young people can and want to engage and the types of engagement their communities need are not recognized or valued (Brann-Barrett, 2014). This has negative consequences for people and the long-term sustainability of communities.

Valuing multiple communication forums, I engage in arts-related research and teaching methods incorporating photography, music, and art making (Brann-Barrett, 2013). I also

use art, multimedia, and dialogue in research dissemination. I host art-making cafés to display participants' artistic reflections about their community and invite people to extend the conversations through their own art making and discussion. I have been involved in the creation and operation of Cape Breton University's Cooperative Study Club—a collaborative community-university learning space. It is through our artistic scholarship and community engagement that Janis and I first connected as community-based educators.

Janis's Story

I began working in community as a visiting pediatric physical therapist employed at a central hospital for New Mexico health care. I travelled throughout the city and to rural and First Nations communities, engaging families in the special care of their infants who were demonstrating marked delays in their neuromotor development. The work was complex, as with any medical intervention brought into culturally diverse settings. As I was adding art therapy to my toolbox in 1994, further challenges emerged. Third-party payment for health care increased, which limited the time I could spend with families. I gradually left physical-therapy practice to work in solidarity with others, especially those who were most affected by the underlying social determinants of health, including poverty and inequality. With a small group of street artists and a colleague who worked as a nurse practitioner, we started a project called ArtStreet under the umbrella of Albuquerque Health Care for the Homeless (Timm-Bottos, 1995). Here I witnessed the power of agency of people without homes or economic power to teach and empower themselves and each other when provided a safe place to create (Timm-Bottos, 2011).

Today, I teach in a graduate program in the Department of Fine Arts at Concordia University in the Creative Arts Therapies program. I work primarily with students becoming art therapists and citizens becoming community leaders and support the development of a network of small community art studios—called Art Hives. These are gathering places to share community concerns and to sustain a practice of inquiry and self-care. Currently there are 30 studios in Montreal, with 92 across Canada and beyond.¹ A central purpose of my teaching is to hold spaces for students and other community members to uncover their creative capacity and share their multiple skills with the rest of the community and the university. By building on diverse ways of being and knowing, we have succeeded in enacting small worlds in which we learn together.

Predicaments Encountered

Giroux (1988) imagined schools as “democratic public spheres” (p. xxxii) that can be defended as “institutions that provide the ideological and material conditions necessary to educate a citizenry in the dynamics of critical literacy and civic courage, and these constitute the basis for functioning as active citizens in a democratic society” (p. xxxii). We agree with Giroux, and as our stories suggest, we envision our universities *and* communities as “schools” where such learning can happen. Implementing this vision is demanding, as the predicaments we describe below suggest.

1 See www.arthives.org.

Balancing Obligations

Balancing obligations to our universities alongside obligations to external communities can be difficult. For example, as university educators we are expected to engage in research and acquire funding. Securing funding obligates us to adhere to protocols and procedures outlined by our institutions and funding agencies. We respect these obligations. Still, when working with citizens and organizations that have their own obligations, this can be a challenge. When I (Tanya) was an early career scholar, I saw an opportunity to bring together organizations and the community to engage in a collaborative research project to support and facilitate youth engagement. I reached out to potential collaborators both locally and abroad. As we forged ahead, challenges emerged. My community partners worked in non-profit fields and had exorbitant demands on their time. They did not have administrative support to help prepare parts of the application that required their input, and I did not have additional resources to offer assistance. I felt guilty adding to their workload, as the application process was onerous and time-sensitive. I was constantly requesting more material that had to be prepared in a specific format and managed through a complicated electronic system.

After an unsuccessful attempt to secure funds, I modified my plan. I applied for and received a smaller amount of money to engage in a more modest research project. Instead of establishing formal partnerships at the research proposal stage, I made such relationship building part of the actual research project and my ongoing work. This meant it took longer to achieve the initial goals, and elements of that original plan are still to be realized. A smaller-scale project was not necessarily a bad thing, but the experience gave us pause for thought. While many funders encourage community-university collaborative research, the processes and procedures can be barriers to such initiatives (Gelmon, Jordan, & Seifer, 2013), particularly when partners, including educators, have limited resources, as is often the case for small non-profits, community advocates, and people living and working on societal margins. Moreover, university faculty may not have adequate time or familiarity with complex application processes to assist community partners. Consequently, community-based educators and their partners may be deterred from developing collaborative proposals in the first place.

Navigating Relationship Responsibilities

As community-based educators, it is our responsibility to engage with communities, people, and organizations in ways respectful of their values and experiences. It takes significant time to get to know our partners and to develop and sustain healthy relationships. As we foster community collaborations, we are still bound to other university responsibilities. We teach and supervise students, offer service to the university, and have extensive research commitments. We enjoy these aspects of our jobs; however, they place limitations on the time required to establish and build relationships with research colleagues within the university as well as with community partners. Like others (Diver & Higgins, 2014), we wonder about our capacity to reciprocate all that our community partners contribute to the relationships. For example, to fulfill our university responsibilities, there are times we are not available in the community. This may be perceived as a lack of commitment or concern. We fear we may inadvertently reinforce some of the objections some partners already have about working with educational institutions. Simultaneously, we worry that if we focus too

much on our community-based work, our relationships with our university partners and students may not receive the attention and focus deserved.

One way we try to attend to these predicaments is to bring our classrooms into the community and the community into our classrooms. However, this does not entirely dissolve the concern. My (Jani's) first commitment to a nearby neighbourhood was to use initial university research funds to pay rent on a small storefront in order to set up a community art studio and classroom. Once a space was secured, it was difficult not to overextend promises to the community. Initially, the space was not in use full-time, which created tensions among my students and with the community. The students were eager to initiate activities and I was cautious not to start programming without assurance of our ability to sustain it. While we advocate for closer university and community relationships, honouring responsibilities to both is an ongoing challenge.

Measuring Outcome Expectations

As academic community-based educators, we realize that our institutional and academic affiliations hold expectations regarding the outcome of our work. Professional training programs such as art therapy have expectations of delivering standardized programming, whereas community work is experimental and may offer emergent new ways of delivering health services. Similarly, communities and organizations rightfully expect expertise to be shared in ways relevant to them. We welcome the opportunity to engage with everyone who has a stake in our work in meaningful ways, yet we can become overwhelmed by the myriad ways we are expected to produce outcomes.

For example, peer-reviewed publications are recognized as valuable academic contributions, but not all publication outlets are valued the same (Gelmon et al., 2013). As academic community-based educators, when we publish, we consider the journals that host our work and the access they will provide. Some open-access online journals that are available to our community partners are not weighted as heavily by academic peers and administrators. Further, communities often want to experiment with alternative, creative forms of knowledge mobilization. At La Ruche d'Art in St-Henri, a university storefront classroom, we produce five to six exhibits a year to share with the greater public the works being developed by the community, which are often inspired by art making happening within the studio space. I (Tanya) host art-making cafés for the public to share research and commit time and research resources to the Cooperative Study Club. These modes of dissemination may or may not be recognized as acceptable research outputs (Checkoway, 2013) but they are critical to our work—they are what are valued in our communities. Hence, we attempt to manage all expectations.

Interpreting Predicaments, Questioning Power, and Reimagining Scholarship

Many predicaments we feel arise from discomfort with how power influences our educative practice. Pierre Bourdieu's (Bourdieu, 1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) interpretation of power and his conceptual use of *field* and *capital* help to describe how power works. For Bourdieu, fields are spaces in which humans hold social positions in relations to one another. He likened fields to sports arenas (Bourdieu, 1990), where people's interactions are influenced by their social positions, much like players in a game interact according to their positions on their team. How people engage with each other is influenced by what is

deemed acceptable in the field—metaphorically speaking, the implicit rules of the game. From this perspective, scholarship is a field and everyone who has a stake in scholarship are the players. Within fields, human agents struggle to accrue that which is valued in the space—in other words, capital (Bourdieu, 1990). For example, university educators typically recognize that academic publications in high-impact journals hold great value or capital. That capital can potentially help them retain or secure social positioning and varying degrees of influence and power within the institutional field of scholarship. It may also be used as a way to gain other forms of capital. For example, successful funding applications and high-impact publications help educators secure tenure and promotion (Checkoway, 2015), which may increase their economic capital.

Academic community-based educators are situated simultaneously in various fields when engaged in scholarship, and what holds value across the fields is not necessarily aligned. Following on our previous example, Gelmon et al. (2013) wrote that “while scholarly journals are critical for communicating with academic audiences, they are poor vehicles for communicating with practitioners, policymakers, community leaders, and the public” (p. 59).

Predicaments become inevitable when academic community-based educators feel bound to a field of scholarship that either explicitly or implicitly distinguishes between work conducted in universities and work carried out in other public spaces. This distinction creates opposing hierarchies of priorities. Negotiating all these priorities can be overwhelming and ultimately may discourage scholars from embracing the *vocation of humanization* (Freire, 1992/2014). Innovative and progressive work that educators believe can address critical problems may become difficult to sustain.

But that is not the end of the story. Giroux (1988) was adamant that a critique of power be coupled with attention to possible transformation and hope. In his description of power, Foucault (1978/1990) emphasized our capacity to resist. He stated that “power comes from below” and “is everywhere” (pp. 93–94) and “cannot be acquired, seized or shared” (p. 94). However, wherever there is power, there is resistance. “Power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society” (p. 93). When we are inquisitive and reflective about power relationships and recognize our own agency and power to make change happen, we help uncover a politics of truth and knowledge dependent on changing times and places. Therefore, our predicaments indicate a need to critically investigate, challenge, and resist by actively experimenting with alternatives to what is currently valued in education and what constitutes scholarship.

Kreber (2013) might agree that such inquiry be enacted in the public sphere. Using Arendt’s interpretation of human activity, Kreber described scholarship as action. By Arendt’s account, “Action refers to people practicing their freedom to share their opinion in public and thus engage with the opportunity of renewing the world” (Kreber, 2013, p. 864). Action “interrupts the inexorable automatic course of daily life” (Arendt, 1958, p. 246), facilitating the possibility of creating something new. Therefore, Kreber called for “a broader vision of the scholarship of teaching, one where endeavours aimed at improving learning, and creating a better world within which to learn and teach, are nested within the larger concern for creating a better world” (p. 866). Through this lens, we imagine scholarship as public action to be critically investigated, debated, and discussed in the hopes of creating new inclusive and power-disrupting visions of scholarship.

Boyer (1990) has long engaged in this action as he pushes educators to acknowledge and extend the complexity of multiple interconnected elements of scholarship, bearing always in mind responsibility to address world issues in the interest of public good. At the heart of Boyer's thinking is an interweaving of universities and broader communities in the creation of scholarship—a view we, too, hold as academic community-based educators. Checkoway (2015), who described himself as “a community worker and university professor who practices ‘research as community-building,’ that is ‘research’ and ‘community-building’ as interrelated parts of the same process” (p. 139), is another contributor to this important conversation. It is our intention as academic community-based educators to learn from these discussions and join alongside these educators and others already at the table.

Giroux (2016) held that “one of the challenges facing the current generation of educators and students is the need to reclaim the role that education has historically played in developing critical literacies and civic capacities” (p. 57). Our experiences illustrate that to face this challenge, scholarship cannot be bound by institutional walls. Furthermore, teaching, research, and service in higher education should be recognized as integrated avenues through which we explore critical issues in our society. From this conceptual landscape, we create space to re-evaluate what is valued in the field of scholarship and by whom and how our work can be accomplished. One practical initiative emerging from our experiences is to re-evaluate policies, practices, and award systems in academia (including the bodies that help fund our work). But the end goal is larger. It is to make explicit the need to value and support academics who strive to work in a transdisciplinary fashion and in relationships with other academics, adult educators, students, and diverse citizens and communities, with the intention to respond to society's most serious social and environmental problems. It is this kind of community building in which community-based educators committed to inclusive practice can engage—and in doing so perhaps contribute to, as Kreber (2013) suggested, the making of a better world.

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