

Knowledge Building With Communities

Outreach Scholarship and the Community

To have effective outreach scholarship, high quality faculty must be involved in outreach programs, and these endeavors must be collaborative efforts with the communities they serve. Richard M. Lerner, director, Institute for Children, Youth, and Families (ICYF) at Michigan State University, believes that faculty will involve themselves if the outreach appeals to their heads as well as their hearts, and if they are convinced that outreach scholarship is something they can do to be at the leading-edge of scholarship. Lerner observes that “We know how to build effective programs. What we don’t know how to do is sustain programs in the community.” Typically, outreach is researcher-centered. The researcher comes into a community, creates and conducts a program, evaluates it, and writes it up. Eventually, the grant runs out, the researcher leaves, and the program dies. “We need to find a way to build the program into the values of the community.”

Human Ecology: A Multidisciplinary, Community Collaborative Process

The Institute for Children, Youth, and Families falls within the discipline of human ecology. Research scholarship in home economics has become a multidisciplinary, community collaborative process, offering a model for engaging the best minds. Scholars in the field now view human development as the result of a set of complex, dynamic relationships in a social network, all of which change over time. Human development happens in relation to this context. We cannot understand how human development occurs without focusing on the community in which people live. Therefore, the scholar has to study and work in the community.

Science involves description and explanation, according to Lerner. Science requires researchers to control certain variables in order to assess the effect of other variables on outcomes. In communities, the variables that scholars can manipulate are policies and programs. You change policies and programs or devise new policies and programs to try to change the trajectory of people’s lives, to revise the people-context relationship. Work like contextual research thus blurs the line between basic and applied research.

To be effective both as a scholar and as an agent for change in the community, the researcher must become a co-learner in the community, no longer a temporary observer or agent. The researcher learns about the nature of the community from the community, learns its values, learns what community members think will help bring about positive change. In a collaborative effort, the community learns knowledge and gains expertise to sustain effective programs. Program planning, development, and evaluation are done jointly, building capacity in the community to improve the life opportunities of its children.

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Development-In-Context Evaluation (DICE) Model

The Institute for Children, Youth, and Families uses a Development-In-Context Evaluation (DICE) model for outreach program development. Through this model, researchers learn from the community what the problems and issues are, and engage the community in the preliminary work and the program planning, including determining desired outcomes and collecting preliminary data. To be effective, the outreach scholar needs to think holistically and include as many voices from the community as possible. The aim is to cause social change, so this is activist scholarship. Evaluation should be focused on forming effective programs that catalyze social change in the community, and so evaluation should be part of day-to-day program activities. Effective outreach programs build from the strengths of the community to increase community capacity and promote empowerment of community members.

With the DICE approach, programs are based on the norms and values of the community. Young people are more likely to be involved. Because the community is an active participant and because evaluation is participatory, the ability of the community to attain its goals is enhanced.

The DICE Model in Action: ICYF and the Black Child and Family Institute

Natreece Hill described the collaboration between ICYF and the Black Child and Family Institute (BCFI) in Lansing. The BCFI was created to deal with issues that disproportionately affect black children and families in Lansing. Its mission is to mobilize resources to improve the quality of life of black children and families. ICYF is using the DICE model to involve staff members, program participants, and community members in the evaluation of staff and programming at the BCFI.

Evaluation focused on what is unique to the BCFI that makes it difficult for it to reach its goals, according to Urminda Firlan. Staff identified issues that they were empowered to change and brainstormed to develop creative, realistic solutions that did not require significant funding. They relayed findings to board members, who will devise a plan for implementation.

As a result of using the DICE model in the BCFI, learning and insights have been gained through the development of collaborative relationships. Outreach scholars and graduate assistants alike have learned the importance of establishing strong relationships that can lead to fuller insights. Since this is a new model of outreach scholarship, members of the community sometimes have difficulty understanding the collaborative process and have expectations of a more dependent relationship. Researchers need to explain the process thoroughly to collaborators and encourage their full participation.

Researchers used to obtain efficiency of outreach scholarship by coming in and taking control of the program. However, to be effective over time, outreach scholars need to balance this efficiency with collaboration. Scholars need the input of community members, while collaborators themselves are unsure about their responsibility to provide input and the appropriate ways to do so.

Certain complications are inherent in any team approach: scheduling, time management, and the potential for conflict are examples. One effective method for teamwork is to use focus group procedures during meetings. Limit the size of the group; use a moderator for meeting leadership; record the meeting and take notes; establish procedures for reaching resolution; and circulate an agenda to all participants before the meeting. The focus group model ensures the involvement of all collaborators in the direction of the effort.

Results and Conclusions

The ICYF has spent a great deal of time building the collaboration with the BCFI before dealing with the issue at hand – neighborhood violence and gangs. The partners are not yet able to deal with the issue because they are still dealing with staff organization, morale, and organizing volunteers. Outreach researchers in the effort have learned a lot about dealing with the community. Lerner and others are convinced that this model of community collaboration will not only provide valuable information and basic knowledge. In addition, it will enable the delivery of information that will substantially affect the community's ability to improve the quality of life of its children.

The Dilemmas of University-School Collaboration on Research: The Case of MSU'S Professional Development Schools

Introduction and Context

In 1988, MSU's College of Education initiated a series of long-term partnerships with nearby public schools, partnerships designed to develop and demonstrate good practice and to conduct research in three areas: K-12 teaching and learning, the education of teachers and other educators, and organization and leadership.

Through the Professional Development Schools (PDS), some thirty-five faculty members from the college and other university departments now work with about 250 teachers in eight urban and suburban schools to bring K-12 practice more into harmony with current research. University faculty members typically devote a quarter or more of their time to PDS work; K-12 teachers have a portion of their time released to join in the collaboration. Some MSU faculty members actually teach K-12 students part time, and many PDS teachers have co-taught with university faculty in courses given on campus. In this way, professors get into closer touch with the realities of the K-12 teacher's world, and vice versa.

As K-12 practice improves, the PDSs become better settings for the education of intending teachers, especially for interns in the fifth year of the college's new teacher education program. K-12 teachers become increasingly able to model and to talk articulately about research-based practices, thus becoming better mentors for the interns as well as resources for their colleagues in other schools. By the same token, university faculty draws on weekly experience in schools to breathe a stronger sense of the realities of schooling into their on-campus coursework.

These partnerships entail changes in the roles of university faculty members as well as teachers, changes in the norms and values of both organizations, and changes in the ways schools are governed and managed. And not only do the PDSs draw on existing research as they make improvements, but they also carry out research designed to generate new knowledge about teaching, learning, organization, and leadership at both the K-12 and university levels. PDS proponents argue that the research coming out of PDSs is likely to be more useful than much lab-based research because it is carried out with teachers' participation in real schools and classrooms.

The complex of interrelated functions undertaken by PDSs illustrates at least three important ideas about outreach:

- outreach cuts across the traditional categories of teaching, research, and service, blending them in new ways;
- outreach can be a two-way process, benefiting the university as well as its partners or "client"; and

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- outreach can be a collaborative process, involving both the university and its partner-clients actively in the creation, application, and communication of new knowledge.

Accomplishments and Challenges in the Flint School Partnership

Sandra Wilcox, associate professor of teacher education at MSU, described a project involving mathematic teachers at Holmes Middle School and two elementary schools that are feeder schools to Holmes. Funded by the National Science Foundation, this project focused on assessment in service of teaching and learning in middle school math and science. First, the project sought to learn more about how teachers can use assessment as ongoing activity in their classroom for monitoring student progress in mathematics and science. Then, information gathered about how students learn could be used to aid teachers in making ongoing decisions on teaching to reshape their own instructional practices.

Aims were to: 1) develop, implement, and document a model of an assessment process; 2) develop, test, and document a set of assessment strategies and tools around selected curricular topics; and 3) test a process of dissemination in Michigan and Ohio to learn more about the utility of this new process. As outcomes, the project developed cases of classroom assessment built around teaching and learning episodes, cases that are richly complex and can be viewed through a variety of lenses and intended to be used in several kinds of professional learning activity:

- continuing professional development workshops;
- school-based mathematics groups;
- a teacher education course (preservice and graduate continuing education).

The classroom assessment seeks to improve teachers' ability to "engage in deep analysis of student work," using careful observation and listening to students' own reflection on their task completion to better assess student understanding and be able to respond accordingly with alternative learning strategies.

There were multiple dimensions and complexities in taking a conceptual model that shapes a grant proposal and enacting it in a real context. The uncommon practice of explicitly using assessment to shape instruction was quite challenging. Tension among project participants centered around the aims of the project. Despite attempts to decouple assessment from grading, teachers had a struggle with this methodological if not paradigmatic shift. Two of the original teacher participants were "disinvited" from participating because they really focused on grading. Individual expectations for students varied, causing some conflict. In

urban settings, there are often diminished expectations for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and for children of color, which allows some teachers to abdicate responsibility in light of success or lack thereof.

Accomplishments and Progress

More teachers begin to share and recognize “moments of assessment” in the classroom and to develop cases from classroom events. Factors that have contributed to progress include:

- Creating a professional community between the schools and the university.
- Developing a model — a set of questions — to shape work.
- Working in common mathematical domains.
- Building on what teachers already were doing. This made for difficult work in the first year, but in the end this made real progress possible.
- With funding you can buy time, but it is a two-edged sword. Teachers spend a great deal of time out of the classroom in multiday retreats.
- Creating products that give public recognition of the contributions of project teachers to the larger mathematics education community. Teachers very often don’t get public recognition. Participants received recognition for their contributions to the Connected Math Project.

An audience member asked why this project focused on the assessment process. Assessment was the piece that was missing. Other PDS activities focused on developing innovative curricula, but as long as teachers continued to assess in traditional ways, these standard methods could not describe or reveal how kids learn. Another goal was to link assessment with teaching and learning and not merely with grading. The application of this to teaching and learning at the university level meets the goal of reciprocity in the partnerships mentioned above. There is much that can be learned from these models, and ways to use them in teacher education are being explored, beginning with their inclusion in the course on teacher assessment.

How Research Questions Can Become Important to Teacher Education

While PDS initially concentrated more within the school than on external relationships within the community, Cheryl Rosaen, associate professor of teacher education, described a project involving home/school connection. The goal was to get parents involved in their children’s education through: 1) home activities developed by teachers, and 2) projects that would bring parents into the classroom. The focus was family-based and

attempted to get beyond the “potluck stage” of family and parent involvement.

A series of initial parent forums asked how parental involvement can improve children’s learning in order to generate questions together. Together a teacher and a researcher developed a pilot activity that discloses ways to help parents look at their children’s work and evaluate progress over time. Another product was a video that showed how parents can work with their children through shared talk about part of their journal writing. A questionnaire sent home for the parents and interviews with the children revealed the perceptions parents and children had of their sharing experience, and what parents noticed. This served as an assessment of the quality of parental involvement.

Challenges and Responses

Timing was critical. Action research is typically devoted to investigating and solving problems of ongoing practice. Research can inform the next idea but may not be timed to inform ongoing practice. However, in this kind of project the link between observational data and reaction has to be timely. For example, it was discovered that the teacher needs to lay groundwork before sending the journal and questionnaire home. The right questions invite more conversation. Parents need to understand the partnership they have with teachers: you help me see what you’re seeing with your children at home. Another example involved the videotape sharing. When parents were not properly prepared, their reactions were unpredictable and sometimes unproductive to student learning. One child’s parents laughed in appreciation when they saw the video, but the student interpreted this as being laughed at. Another child’s parent did not watch the video at all. It was important that the parent not only watch the video but appropriately share with the child.

A related dilemma in past projects has been the conflict of meeting grant deadlines and the timing of research. Rosaen described the stress and tension in balancing the demands of meeting grant deadlines and the need to let the project evolve at its own pace. She noted that “In past years, I was in great discomfort because I was to produce products that were not ready to be produced. There were some moments of discomfort in the middle. I had to decide they will come [eventually] and they did. I had to ignore project timeliness. Without the cooperation of teachers in the classroom, there is no project. Therefore, the needs of the classroom came first.”

A second dilemma in numerous projects involved protecting the rights of research subjects. How can the rights of both the children and the teacher education candidates be protected? It is difficult to protect people’s identity in a school that is highly visible to the public and the research community, which is especially problematic when it is not a

success story. If an intern is having problems with practice, how can the research be shared and her privacy be protected at the same time? On the positive side, children have not had a problem with researchers in the classroom and they have begun to engage in the research-gathering process, inviting the researchers to hear what they are doing or share in their classwork.

A member of the audience asked how to handle situations where privacy will be broached or invaded. Rosaen answered, “We are still learning about this and there is a lot more that I know now about this issue that I didn’t before. We keep asking questions regarding privacy frequently. We consider each event a new event and ask again about privacy and confidentiality. It still doesn’t take away some of the risks inherent in this kind of work.” The problematic nature of the role of participant/observer causes the researcher in the classroom to be viewed by students as another teacher. The researcher may also get caught up in the process of teaching, which may alter the nature of the research.

The audience member commented that “Just as you are asking them to become reflective practitioners, you yourself must become reflective too. Just as you are asking teachers to do ongoing assessment, you too are doing ongoing assessment and I wouldn’t call it a research process but you are engaging in the developmental process. Our language is proving a barrier to this kind of activity.” Rosaen responded that “Although it is a different breed of research, it is research. I do have, as a goal, writing about this issue beyond the story I shared with you today.”

The norms of the scientific model exacerbate the conflict between the scholar and the practitioner. One member of the audience asked if you can get creative and whether you should expand into the broader community? How can the narrow focus on the research project itself, which satisfies the demands of good science, be compromised with the immediate needs of the community at large for improved strategies for parental involvement? Rosaen described several ways to “enlarge our picture...[and] reach out to the community.” Projects are viewed “in relationship to what is going on in the whole school or school district. We also try to get teachers to share more widely than their own school or class. We have the privilege of allowing this to evolve.” Nevertheless, researchers are also actively looking for external application and generalization.

Is all this changing teacher education? It is creating opportunities to work differently with schools through group field visits, allowing professors of education to work individually with children. This created a final dilemma. Rosaen admitted that not enough attention had been paid to the impact of the researcher on the learning environment and students. However, one audience member saw this as more opportunity than disadvantage: “Maybe we need more people like you to be in the classroom.”