Toward Participatory Civic Engagement: Findings and Implications of a Three-Year Community-Based Research Study

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Abstract

This article presents findings from a three-year community-based research study and discusses the implications of these findings as they relate to building college-community relationships in face-to-face and digital contexts. Researchers collected data on digital deliverables and on the work process itself. The study partnered a university writing center with an adult education program and a state employment agency to develop online literacy resources housed on a widely used OWL. The resources were designed to help marginalized populations pass the writing section of the GED and compose cover letters and résumés. The study was driven by these questions: (a) how might mixed-methods research help writing studies form relationships with local organizations? (b) how might these methods help community members help themselves? (c) what are the outcomes of using these methods? To help answer these questions, researchers used descriptive statistics and grounded theory to code and analyze data. Findings indicate that the project helped researchers: (a) develop a close relationship with community partners; (b) compose deliverables that met partners' needs; and (c) assist participants in improving their writing. Despite these results, however, participants' limited adoption of the online material suggests that more research is needed on technology use within at-risk communities.
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"You don't necessarily always have a volunteer or teacher that is available all the time. That [points at the online resources] means that they can be self-learners. So we have a real need for programs so that the student can learn independently. We have a lot of students that prefer a computer to a book." (Brenda, from an interview conducted during the study).

This article presents findings from a three-year community-based research study and discusses the implications of these findings as they relate to building college-community relationships in face-to-face and digital contexts. For the study, researchers[1] used mixed methods to collect data on digital deliverables and on the work process itself as a civic engagement project. The project partnered the Purdue Writing Lab with two community organizations: an adult basic education program, the Lafayette Adult Resource Academy (LARA) and a state employment agency, WorkOne Express.

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[1] My colleague, Jaclyn M. Wells, and I collaborated on this civic engagement project but completed separate research. When discussing portions of the project Jaclyn and I completed together, I use "we," "our," "us," etc. When referencing tasks I completed for my part of the study, I use "I."

In response to a lack of digital material available to the community organizations, researchers and civic partners designed and tested online literacy resources to help marginalized populations pass the writing section of the GED and compose cover letters and résumés for entry-level jobs. The literacy resources are now housed on the Purdue Online Writing LAB (OWL). We named the project the Community Writing and Education Station, or CWEST (pronounced "quest"), and the WorkOne resources can be found on the Purdue OWL here: https://owl.english.purdue.edu/engagement/34/. I should note that since we developed these resources, the GED has changed, and so Writing Lab staff had to remove the GED writing material. At the time of publication, a graduate student in the Purdue Writing Lab was working with LARA to update the GED material and repost it to the Purdue OWL.

Interested in both process and product, the researchers were guided by the following research questions: (a) how might mixed-methods research help writing studies form relationships with local organizations?; (b) how might these methods help community members help themselves?; (c) and what are the outcomes of using these methods? To help answer these questions, researchers used descriptive statistics, grounded theory, and writing assessment to code and analyze data and measure outcomes. Findings from the study indicate that the model emerging from the project, participatory civic engagement,[2] helped researchers: (a) develop a sustainable, participatory relationship with community partners; (b) compose deliverables that met the partners' needs; and (c) assist participants in improving their writing. Despite these results, community participants' limited adoption of the online material suggests that more research is needed on technology use within at-risk communities.

This piece also discusses implications and applications of the project's model for use in other contexts, especially where researchers may be using an iterative design approach to work with community partners. While not new to iterative design, the mixed-methods model discussed here presents a unique framework to those working with local communities as citizens strive to become knowledge makers rather than just knowledge consumers.

1. Guiding theories

To help local communities become knowledge makers, rhetoric, composition, and technical communication scholars have conducted considerable research and developed numerous approaches to civic engagement. As a result, civic engagement has expanded its theories and research methods; the study discussed here was guided by many of these models. Recently, theoretical approaches have moved beyond charity models to include discursive methods like those outlined by Robert Asen (2004). Asen (2004) pushed traditional concepts of civic discourse and civic engagement into rhetorical and more flexible notions of knowledge making. He asserted that conventional approaches to defining and measuring citizenship are limited given predominant civic activities in today's society; for instance, he contrasted traditional fraternal clubs with contemporary involvement in self-help organizations (pp. 190–191). In addition, he claimed that present scholarship on citizenship stops short of initiating action and sustained civic engagement (p. 191). To address these shortcomings, Asen (2004) argued that scholars can integrate discourse theory into their notions of citizenship—doing so allows them to: (a) shift the concept and definition of citizenship into a mode of public engagement (sustained process of action); and (b) expand our notion of citizenship to include local, personal, and discursive acts, as well as national and public acts (such as voting and demonstrating) (pp. 191–192). Asen claimed, "Reorienting our framework from a question of what to a question of how usefully redirects our attention from acts to action" (p. 191). Challenging traditional notions of citizenship and integrating discursive rhetorical strategies allows stakeholders in civic engagement more flexibility to develop their own identities and resist the misconception that expert knowledge rests only within certain populations, for instance the ivory tower.

Similarly, empirical research methods have pushed beyond the binary split of town and gown. These methods include qualitative measures suggested by Ellen Cushman (1996, 1999) who pioneered the idea of activist research, an approach that "combines postmodern ethnographic techniques with notions of reciprocity and dialogue to ensure reciprocal and mutually beneficial relations among scholars and those with whom knowledge is made" (p. 332). Quantitative measures now include tracking online database navigation paths, using Likert scale surveys, and recording the number of mouse clicks used for online protocols, as noted by Simmons and Grabill (2007). Unique to Simmons and Grabill is their focus on collaborative knowledge building between researchers and participants, thereby shifting the epistemological center

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[2] A term also seen in urban studies, public policy, and higher education. This approach is also known as Community-Based Participatory Research in the health fields and in disciplines like psychology.