THOUGHT PIECE

Community Engagement as Publishable Scholarship

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Abstract

The structures that evaluate what counts as novel and fundable knowledge have evolved over a long timeline, primarily driven by traditional forms of explorative, descriptive and critical analysis research. Community Based Participatory Research does not always fit evaluation and funding structures as comfortably as these models of research which are more established in the global academy, and requires careful navigation of, and some further fine-tuning to, review and accreditation processes, to stand beside more traditionally accepted scholarly practices in being readily recognised as producing original scholarly knowledge.

Context

Engaged research has a long history. Looking back a few decades, community engaged research was regarded as a niche approach within a fairly narrow group of disciplines, and was mostly viewed in the formalised research space as a living laboratory, in which community engagement best practice principles had little influence on the way that the value of the research was assessed. Broadly speaking, concepts such as mutually beneficial and mutually respectful criteria, and knowledge co-creation, are relatively new concerns to the review and accreditation processes of research.

  The change has been quite significant in the last 15 years, with most mainstream universities elevating community engagement to the status of being a third pillar of the academy, alongside teaching and learning as the first, and research as the second. This has naturally had a significant influence on the way community engagement is viewed, and resourced, within universities, with service learning and engaged research becoming more of a culture within the academy, as opposed to a specialist methodology within a specific set of disciplines which are focussed on human behaviour, health, education, and development. We now see frequent mission statements asserting that the purpose of universities is to serve the public good (as opposed to being an institutional benefit only), and community engagement programmes are often cited as evidence of this.

The formalisation of community engagement has been good for the emergence of a greater range of disciplines involved in community based participatory research, but, given the relatively recent growth of engaged research into the broad academic space, the established practices for evaluating research contribution have lagged behind the evolution of community engagement thinking. Many of our accreditation and compliance processes have been established with little consideration of the needs of community engaged research.

Engaged Research

The approach to engaged research has seen some significant evolution in thinking, from the early days of community participation, through the development of principles around ensuring that projects involving researchers, students and community organisations and individuals are mutually respectful and mutually beneficial, to a place where the knowledge and experience of community members is valued in the planning and design of research projects, and credited in the outcomes as co-authors of knowledge. Formalised processes to capture the engaged relationship as a research collaboration have emerged, and a body of theory around a *Community Based Participatory Research* (CBPR) Model has started to take form[1].

It is both reasonable and necessary that engaged research practitioners wrestle with what it means to work with community partners as collaborators in a scholarly project. This is still a fairly messy space, particularly where the community partner does not have the levels of formal education or research experience generally accepted in academic circles as being necessary for a researcher.

In many cases, community collaborators are not especially interested in the research process from the viewpoint of building scholarly reputation and influence; they are more interested in the social or environmental impact that can be achieved from the work. Nevertheless, where community collaborators have contributed to the rigorous process of designing and implementing an intellectual project, they have earned the right to be regarded as co-authors of the process and the outcomes. It is also possible that the learning that comes from an engaged project encompasses innovations that were never envisaged by the academic researchers, but originated entirely from the collaborating community. Novel engagements with and uses of digital technologies are a prominent example of where social innovations have been discovered serendipitously by researchers[2]. The integrity of academic researchers in such cases should not permit the authorship of such innovations to be downplayed in outcomes, reports and scholarly publications.

There exists a wide range of engaged research approaches, from relatively shallow community participation through to co-creation of knowledge, some of which are less (and some more) challenging to the research process in terms of negotiating review and compliance requirements. This thought piece focuses on CBPR as bringing some of the biggest challenges in navigating established research accreditation and oversight processes.

Research Evaluation Processes

The role of public universities and their engagement with society can be viewed as being entirely about *knowledge*. Universities produce and disseminate knowledge through various forms of research, creative endeavours and scholarship, in order to advance the collective understanding and address challenges of the social and natural worlds. Universities teach in ways which facilitate student learning and critical engagement with knowledge and its production. Universities discharge their societal responsibility through engagement with pressing social and environmental concerns, seeking not only to make interventions, but to create new understandings that will advance society.

The foundation of all scholarly evaluation is peer review. This is the evaluation of scientific, professional, or academic work by others (usually independent of the project, and often anonymous) with an appropriate level of specialist knowledge and understanding in the field. All academics are inducted into this basic evaluation instrument through the review of journal papers, conference or book publications, grant proposals, external examining of theses, evaluating teaching portfolios, employment applications, promotions, awards and prizes, and serving on accreditation panels for evaluating the quality of entire institutions.

In the research space, the purpose of peer review is most often to recognise original knowledge. The South African Higher Education System is partially funded through a block grant that rewards institutions for producing original scholarly knowledge in the form of publications and higher degree theses. A *Research Outputs Policy*[3] outlines the attributes that must be met for a research publication to be "accredited", and thus qualify for financial subsidy. The acid test here is that it must meet a specified standard, and must represent original scholarly content, i.e. new knowledge. A paper describing a community project, no matter how significant the social impact, will not be accredited if it does not represent new knowledge, as determined by peer review.

Over time, formal scholarly review processes have settled on a set of broadly accepted metrics for assessing the worth of research results. A number of proxies for research quality and influence have become commonly used in the global academy. Universities, funding agencies, and rating establishments regularly use bibliometric measures, which are a collection of mechanisms such as *citations* (references other articles), *citation indices* (lists of referencing articles that reference a particular article), the *H-Index* (Hirsh number – a proxy for the relative influence of a scholarly author), and *impact factor* (an indication of the relative importance of a journal in its field). These bibliometric measures are not just numbers, they are numbers derived from peer review. They are intended to make the work of assessors and reviewers simpler and more objective, in the domains where they make sense. But they do not always make sense across all domains.

Publication citations are generally regarded as a good proxy for the strength of the author's scholarly influence across peers within their specialist discipline, but it is not a perfect proxy for all aspects of research value. As an illustrative example of how citations can

be of limited value in representing the social or environmental impact of a piece of research, consider the following. Nobel Prizes are awarded on the basis of the greatest benefit to humankind. A widely known award in the research domain is the 2014 Nobel Prize for Physics, which was awarded to three scientists for the invention of blue light emitting diodes (LEDs). The science behind the LED light bulb revolutionised lighting technology, and these Nobel Laureates are credited with making a major social and ecological contribution, by literally taking a step towards saving the planet through vastly improved energy efficiencies in an everyday household product. The original breakthrough was published as:

> S. Nakamura, T. Mukai, M. Senoh, N. Iwasa, "Thermal annealing effects on p-type Mg-doped GaN films", *Jpn. J. Appl. Phys. 31*, 139–142 (1992).

This publication has attracted about 100 citations, many of them after the award of the Nobel Prize. This level of citation might be expected as the paper's content is esoteric, requiring specialist knowledge to understand. By contrast, a scientific publication by Lowry *et al* is often referred to as the most cited paper ever.

> Lowry, OH; Rosebrough, NJ; Farr, AL; Randall, RJ (1951). "Protein measurement with the Folin phenol reagent", *Journal of Biological Chemistry. 193 (1): 265–75*

Also requiring specialist knowledge to read, it describes what became known as the *Lowry Protein Assay*, and has been cited more than 310 000 times. Did Lowry *et al* win a Nobel Prize? They did not.

The mixed acceptance of the H-index is also worth noting. It was proposed by theoretical physicist JE Hirsh at the University of California-San Diego as a mechanism for determining the relative quality of the work of theoretical physicists. It has caught on, and is generally used across the physical sciences, but is often rejected and criticised as inappropriate by researchers in the humanities and social sciences. Some mechanisms that make useful proxies for research value in some situations do not necessarily transfer well to other contexts.

"Research for impact" has recently become an often-repeated phrase in research evaluation contexts, with ongoing engagements seeking new impact metrics appropriate to specific types of research, in order to reduce the reliance on bibliometrics. For engaged research, assessments such as an improved social condition (or environmental condition), skills transfer, and sustainability of an intervention, have emerged from such discussions. While many funding agencies (and some university personal promotion processes) have started to use "impact" as a metric for assessing research quality, there has to date been little consensus across the broader academy on what this means and how to consistently express it as a measurement parameter.

Engaged research is particularly exposed to the need to comply with legislation and policy frameworks, far more so than theoretical or desktop research. The example raised in the challenges listed below is that of complying with ethical approval frameworks.

In South Africa the oversight of research ethics standards and accreditation, for all disciplines, is vested in the National Health Research Ethics Council[4] (NHREC), which falls under the legislation of the National Health Act[5]. This oversight structure has resulted in a bio-medical lens through which all research is viewed in the drafting of ethics review processes and standards, to the detriment of disciplines which are far removed from this model. Depending on the national legislation in the area of jurisdiction of the research work, researchers also need to comply with other codified laws and policies, such as Child Protection Acts, Protection Of Personal Information Acts, Access To Information Acts, and so on.

Common Challenges

This section discusses some of the frequent challenges that engaged research projects face in navigating current scholarly review and accreditation processes.

Ethical Research Approval Processes

The rise of formalised ethical compliance processes across the world has frequently been met with resistance – not because researchers wish to behave unethically, but because the compliance models have often been transferred inappropriately from one context in which they made sense, to another in which they do not entirely work. In South Africa, the bio-medical leaning of the NHREC has created several areas of discomfort and even inadequacy for disciplines with substantially different research models.

One such example is the classical research ethics approval workflow, which requires the researcher to

- have a reasonably mature design of research instruments, and
- identify all risks and establish mitigating controls for them.

All of which is required before being granted ethical approval to proceed with field work. It assumes that everything about the research project is pre-determined. This kind of approach does not leave space for the agency of participants and community co-designers. It assumes and requires that the agenda and process will be set and controlled entirely by the academic researcher.

This particular issue has been addressed at my institution, without flaunting any national compliance directives, by introducing a two-stage process, in which pre-engagement ethical approval may be sought to proceed with the collaborative design phase, after which a more concrete submission is made. It has resolved an impasse, but it increases the administrative overhead.

Ethics and research integrity offices play a critical role in research institutions. Their role is not only the identification and mitigation of research-related risks, but the facilitation of research and the safeguarding of the reputation of researchers and the institution.

To find workable solutions to seemingly uncompromising bureaucratic regulations requires the participation of researchers from the areas affected. In this example, it needs CBPR practitioners to be part of the design and running of institutional ethical processes.

In South Africa, the NHREC has a requirement for accredited human research ethics committees to include formal community membership, which is a healthy nod in this direction.

Producing research outputs that "count"

There is a growing acknowledgement that research impact is important, and that bibliometric figures are not adequate to describe social or environmental impact. However, there is no stable common agreement about what research impact is, or how it should be assessed.

A number of social media based "Alt metrics" have become increasingly popular in the sense of measuring public engagement with research projects. Examples are:

- Number of views
- Number of downloads
- Frequency of mentions/discussions in blogs/posts/tweets
- Number of re-tweets
- Number of likes

All of these are relatively easily measured, but none are likely to replace measures based on peer review.

Other measurement criteria for the effectiveness of engaged research have been suggested, and used primarily at institutional level. Here are some from various university-community engagement programmes (not all of them equally useful):

- Participation (how many students, how many community members, how much time they spend on partnership tasks)
- Impact on community partners (how many community members served, effectiveness in meeting community goals)
- Student learning (academic, social, personal outcomes)
- Social impact (partner estimation of benefit, goals attained, sustainability of interventions, social innovations)

The challenge is that many of the suggested measures latch onto the aspects of a research programme which can be reduced to a number. These are not always helpful in identifying quality.

Much work remains to be done on what constitutes a consistent and reliable measure of research quality and impact in social and environmental spaces. In South Africa this work

would be not only for the purpose of appropriately acknowledging and resourcing engaged research projects, but also for identifying novel forms of knowledge that might emanate from this kind of work. We have seen the well-established DHET accreditation processes expanded in the past six years from text-only scholarly publications, to recognise creative outputs that are of a novel scholarly nature, which include works of art, music, drama, fiction, and various other forms of creative artifact. The next challenge is to find a way to expand this form of accreditation to a third category of engaged research modalities, which recognise novel contributions in social and environmental impact.

For now, the research output category that counts, in terms of accreditation, easier access to resources, and career development, is that which is recognised in the academy as original scholarly knowledge. This means it has been peer reviewed, it represents original knowledge, it is in a format that is archivable, and is citable by other researchers who are able to build upon it.

The meaning of Peer Review in CBPR

Whereas including a community partner as a co-author of a publication is not likely to encounter any institutional or sector resistance, the involvement of community partners in the peer review process of scholarly material is likely to be rejected in our current frameworks, unless they already have the requisite level of formal education or research track record.

For example, it is now generally unthinkable in university spaces for the examiner of a PhD thesis to be anyone other than a specialist in the field who has already earned that level of qualification themselves, and usually has done much more than that in terms of building a research track record that earns them the reputation of an expert peer reviewer. Although, at some point in the early bootstrapping process of doctoral programmes it must have been acceptable for a thesis at this level to be evaluated by people who had not yet themselves earned a doctorate.

Where we are in our current evolution of community engagement, it might not be too important an issue that most members of the community involved in engaged research programmes are not in a position to review scholarly writing. There is already a fairly rich community of established academics who are interested in this kind of research.

But this remains an issue that we need to wrestle with in relation to the assessment of the impact of research. As we find more appropriate metrics for the value of engaged research, it is likely that the degree of legitimacy, for at least some of the more qualitative metrics, will be found lacking if not done together with a community partner.

Timelines to undertake meaningful CBPR

Some of the most useful forms of engaged research seek to work collaboratively across extended periods of time, to understand change and continuity, and determine causality. Many of our most useful social and environmental projects which have led to

real improvements in policy, resourcing, and sustainable quality of life, have required longitudinal studies over decades rather than years. Contrast this with the reality that many university researchers deal with, in terms of:

- student project deadlines,
- rapid assessment expectations,
- consultancy snapshot reviews,
- short research funding cycles, and
- frequent changes in the award criteria of funding agencies.

Despite strong wording in institutional mission statements committing universities to community engagement, there remain bureaucratic processes, funding encumbrances, and a reliance on short-term participants, which get in the way, and sometimes make it seem almost impossible[6].

Making a meaningful impact in engaged research often requires resilience in the face of multiple challenges.

Steering review and compliance processes in a more nuanced direction

Our current formal review and accreditation processes clearly need some nuancing to better reflect the requirements of engaged research. This will not happen spontaneously – it needs the voices of engaged research practitioners in the spaces where these processes can be steered. There is no substitute for being the change you want to see.

- Participate in forums where research policy is discussed in your institution, and beyond when given the opportunity, in research committees, ethical approval panels, and as peers in proposal and publication reviews.
- Start including your preferred engaged research metrics in publications, proposals and reports. This is important even when such metrics are not called for, as it is the way that accepted metrics gain traction. The widely used H-index did not become widely used because universities and funders spontaneously decided that it was a good proxy for scholarly influence. It started to get used more formally for the evaluation of researchers and research proposals only after the researchers themselves started to use it in their proposals, reports and CVs.

This participation-based remedy might not be met with enthusiasm by already overburdened researchers. Some might believe that it is not worth the effort, that the time and energy needed might not justify the small and gradual gains that are the nature of evolution in the global academy. Those who hold such views should take heart at the

very big shifts that have been seen in recent years in scholarly publishing, in the areas of open access and ownership of intellectual property, which illustrate that it is possible for entrenched processes of scholarly assessment to change[7].

Notes on Contributor

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