Engaged Scholarship: Reflections from a Multi-Talented, National Partnership Seeking to Strengthen Capacity for Sustainability

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ABSTRACT   This paper describes a national partnership of academic researchers, government representatives, and sustainability practitioners who sought to strengthen the capacity of 16 biosphere reserve organizations working across Canada to promote sustainability through collective learning and networking strategies. We begin by situating our work within traditions of community-engaged scholarship and appreciative inquiry, and then ask participants to reflect directly on the questions. We then draw attention to four key themes: building and maintaining trust; setting clear and confirmed expectations; establishing structured and multi-lateral facilitation; and finding the sweet spot for our collective practice. Our reflections address common themes of community-engaged scholarship, including addressing cross-cultural challenges and finding joy in working together.

KEY WORDS   community-engaged scholarship, research partnerships, biosphere reserves, research facilitation, collective learning

Introduction

It may sound like hubris to describe the authors of this paper as "multi-talented," but we are. Our intention is not to boast, but to describe the relative contributions and challenges when we bring together academic researchers, government representatives, and sustainability practitioners across a national partnership. We speak from our "talents" in keeping with the philosophy of appreciative inquiry. Appreciative inquiry is a participatory action research method that seeks to build understanding through a strength-based, generative approach (Nyaupane and Poudel 2012). Although not explicitly rooted in the methodology of appreciative inquiry, our partnership shared many of its characteristics including adhering to participatory action research, developing an inductive research design, adopting a mutual learning process, providing structured facilitation, searching for practical knowledge, and encouraging collective and transformative action.

In this paper, we reflect informally on a partnership composed of UNESCO Biosphere Reserve (BR) practitioners, researchers, and government representatives in Canada to work as a network to improve their capacity to meet conservation, sustainability and learning

objectives.[1] Designated by the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Biosphere Reserve is a name given to regions and organizations established to promote sustainability at the local-regional level. Our research was rooted in community-based or community-engaged scholarship, recognizing that the community in our case is a diverse and geographically dispersed one. But it is linked to community-engaged scholarship through our commitments to sharing, reciprocity and partnerships defined by mutual respect and multi-directional flows of ideas, labour, and benefits (Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities 2001). We brought to this exercise many years of diverse experience and knowledge, associated baggage, assumptions and interests, combined with a genuine desire to work together, and a collective commitment to the ideals of the UNESCO Man and Biosphere Programme (MAB) of which Biosphere Reserves are a part.

We chose not to write this paper in a standard academic format. First, we explain the purpose and challenges of Biosphere Reserves in Canada. To help readers understand the context of our research, we then describe the partnership arrangement and situate it within community-engaged research traditions. To further illustrate the reflexive approach coupled with diverse stakeholder perspectives, we present our reflections as responses to a series of questions we posed to ourselves. We have chosen to give direct voice to each of the authors rather than write over their contemplations.[2] The authors, in this case, are not disinterested observers, but rather engaged participants. They represent the principal investigator (PI) (Reed), co-investigator and former Chief Executive Officer of the Canadian Biosphere Reserves Association (Guertin), the research facilitator who was hired to provide leadership for the project from beginning to end (Godmaire),[3] a representative from the Canadian Commission for UNESCO – a forum of consultation-supporting UNESCO initiatives in Canada, operating at arm's length from the government through the Canada Council for the Arts (Potvin), and a graduate student who attended all national workshops and participated in evaluating the work of the partnership by analyzing and documenting questionnaires and interviews (Abernethy). Each author reflected on the following questions:

1. How do you describe your "position" and role in the partnership?
2. As you began your involvement, what did you want to get out of it? Did these expectations change over time?
3. What challenges, expected or not, did you experience? How were these addressed?
4. What lessons have you learned by working in this partnership that inform the practice of transdisciplinary research and/or community-engaged scholarship?
5. How has your involvement in the partnership influenced your understanding of community-engaged scholarship?

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[1] More formal evaluation of the partnership, by which we identified specific action steps and factors contributing to success of the partnership, can be found at Reed et al. 2014.

[2] Some minor editing was done for accuracy, language, and consistency of presentation.

[3] While Ms Godmaire was hired through the University of Saskatchewan, she maintains residence in Mont St. Hilaire, QC. Her geographic location was an important element to consider in all aspects of her job as research facilitator.

By providing space for individual reflections, we demonstrate a key practice of community-engagement: that is, providing direct voice to academic and community partners alike (Koster et al. 2012). We then synthesize our reflections across four key themes: building and maintaining trust; setting clear and confirmed expectations; establishing structured and multi-lateral facilitation; and finding the sweet spot for our collective practice. Finally, we end with some observations that have inspired our work together.[4]

What are Biosphere Reserves?

UNESCO Biosphere Reserves are geographic areas and civil society organizations composed of local residents, government representatives, and researchers who seek to learn about and take action to make transformational change to advance sustainability. Officially, Biosphere Reserves are mandated to carry out three functions: conserve biological and cultural diversity; advance sustainability; and support scientific research, learning, and public education. Designation of a region as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve does not alter any pre-existing legislation, regulation or property rights. In practical terms, management means that local committees obtain funds to undertake educational and demonstration projects and provide logistical support for scientific research. In Canada, these committees do not have regulatory authority or direct management and decision-making powers, but must operate within provincial and federal legislative frameworks and/or work in cooperation with relevant government agencies. Additionally, with the exception of Clayoquot Sound, which operates from a trust fund established by the federal government at the time of its creation, Biosphere Reserves receive no sustained official government support. The federal government entered into a funding arrangement for all Biosphere Reserves in 2009, but in its annual budget, the government cut short its funding in 2012, one year before the Contribution Agreement expired. Consequently, staff complement varies and is determined by the local success of securing grants, contracts or other fund-raising mechanisms. Some Biosphere Reserves have only one part-time manager; most operate with extensive volunteer labour.

Academics and practitioners refer to Biosphere Reserves as "living laboratories" and "sites of excellence" for their efforts to facilitate dialogue between practitioners and researchers, and encourage learning through deliberation, networking and experimentation (Batisse 1982; Ishwaran et al. 2008; Price 1996; Schultz and Lundholm 2010). Canada is home to sixteen Biosphere Reserves. Together, they form the Canadian Biosphere Reserves Association that is intended to serve as a mechanism for sharing lessons and advocating for collective action to support their mandate. However, because of uneven and limited funding, large geographic distances and socio-cultural differences between sites, lack of familiarity with other people in the network, and a lack of experience with collective learning strategies, Canadian Biosphere Reserve practitioners tended to work alone, thereby reducing their impact locally and nationally. Our project aimed to change this pattern.

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[4] Again, the reader is encouraged to read Reed et al. 2014 for contributions to academic literature.

In 2011, the Canadian Biosphere Reserves Association and Canadian academic researchers formed a partnership to determine if they could jointly develop a "community of practice" dedicated to improving Biosphere Reserve effectiveness through social learning and networking strategies. Funded by a three-year "partnership development grant" from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), the partnership also involved the national governing bodies of the UNESCO Man and Biosphere Programme in Canada (i.e., the Canadian UNESCO Man and Biosphere Programme Committee and the Canadian Commission for UNESCO [CCUNESCO]).

We began with a workshop in June 2011 with all practitioners to identify good practices to share. However, we found from the beginning that Biosphere Reserve practitioners wanted to proceed differently. They asked us to complete an inventory of projects and, working with our facilitator, identified 430 projects they had undertaken. We organized and winnowed this list into three thematic clusters about which they could describe "proven good practices": sustainable tourism; land management and ecosystem services; and education for sustainable development.

In 2012, the practitioners worked with one another in these clusters to identify, assess, share, and promote their good practices on these themes. Their efforts resulted in sharing and broader adoption of pre-existing practices (e.g., tourism charters) as well as the generation of new products (e.g., curricula, videos), tools (e.g., web applications), skills (e.g., facilitation, structured evaluation) and knowledge-sharing practices (e.g., file sharing, virtual communication). In 2012, they presented their reflections to one another and to policy advisors in the Canadian Commission for UNESCO and the Canadian Man and Biosphere Programme committee. The content they produced was judged to be so valuable to a larger audience, both nationally and internationally, that the Canadian Commission for UNESCO offered to turn the best practices identified through the partnership into a bilingual publication.[5] In 2013, the bilingual publication was completed and the Biosphere Reserve practitioners led or co-led several workshops and post-workshop events at the meeting of European and North American delegates to the European Man and Biosphere Conference, EuroMAB. The EuroMAB conference, attended by 197 people from 27 countries, was held in Canada for the very first time.[6] It offered an ideal venue to showcase their collective efforts and learning.

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[5] The publication is now freely available on the Internet (http://unesco.ca/en/home-accueil/biosphere). Other outputs can be viewed on Reed's website at: http://homepage.usask.ca/~mgr774/networking-and-social-learning.php or at YouTube: s://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KHxeOTJaiHI

[6] There are 631 biosphere reserves around the world. UNESCO divides up the world into regions and each 'region' meets once every 2-3 years. A global conference is held about once every 10 years. Canada and the US are in the EuroMAB region and the conference is held once every 2-3 years. This is where all biosphere reserve practitioners and researchers (and government people interested) come together to do presentations and workshops about common issues. Although Canada is not really part of Europe, it was felt that Canada had more in common with Europe than with the Central/South American biosphere reserves. Language was also a criterion for inclusion in the EuroMAB network as the working language of the group is English.

Following EuroMAB, the national network has taken the lead on two more national projects focused on "Social Entrepreneurship" and "Engaging Indigenous Peoples."

We tracked the progress of the partnership by making notes during meetings of the cluster groups and at annual workshops held with the broader partnership. We also conducted interviews with practitioners at the first workshop in June 2011 and near the end in August 2014. We also administered questionnaires to participants in June 2011, September 2012, and November 2013. Our evaluation is not one of neutral observers; however, we believe that by reviewing our work systematically and conferring with one another, we have addressed potential biases suggested by our involvement.

Individual Responses of the Authors

1. How do you describe your "position" and role in the partnership?

Hélène Godmaire: As a researcher-practitioner, my role in the partnership project has been to assist BRs, researchers and other partners in their collaborative work: create practical, conceptual and language bridges between them, keep everyone on track, and trigger communication, partnership and networking. My work with BRs consisted of stimulating their participation, their understanding of the project's vision and concepts, their creativity and their inputs, and most of all their collaboration. Among others, my contribution lay in helping them discover their collective accomplishments and establish an identity at the beginning of the project (to help them better envision their future activities) as a key step in moving forward. The implementation of participatory action research allowed our team to adapt and co-develop strategies to transfer scientific knowledge and UNESCO MAB and MAP[7] goals, to understand and learn from them, and finally, to explore academic perspectives associated with sustainability partnerships. My role with the principal investigator was to be responsive to the research orientations and requests, to report and discuss the field situation, and to enrich the process with my environmental education experiences and practices.

Dominique Potvin: Through my position at the Canadian Commission for UNESCO, my role consisted of supporting the achievement of the MAB programme objectives in Canada in addition to enhancing visibility of Canadian BRs at the international level. It can therefore be described as functioning at the pan-Canadian and international scale. The Commission became involved at the initial stages of the partnership by providing letters of support, but also by supporting initial relationship-building between the research and practitioner community, including through the Canadian MAB committee. After a phase of active learning and listening to BR practitioners, the Commission enhanced its involvement towards the end of the project by ensuring that the identified content was communicated to and shared with

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[7] Hélène Godmaire refers to the Madrid Action Plan. This is the strategic plan set out by the Man and Biosphere Programme internationally and was in effect from 2008-2013. As of September 2014, a new international action plan is still being developed.

wider audiences which would also learn from, and be inspired by, the experiences of Canadian BRs. The Commission also intends to continue supporting informal learning beyond the completion of the funded partnership.

Paivi Abernethy: As an external Research Assistant/ Research Associate on a contract, my role has been as an arms-length 'semi-outside' observer yet at the same time I have been a participant observer during the workshops.

Marc-André Guertin: After a decade or so of local action, I accepted the position as the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) for the Canadian Biosphere Reserve Association (CBRA). CBRA has a mandate to support Canadian BRs in the achievement of their mandate and to demonstrate their collective value nationally and internationally. Like many networks that operate in the environmental field, fundraising and financial issues often take up lots of time and frankly most of the networking efforts of the Association. As a new CEO, and convinced that the network needed to learn from its members' knowledge and experience, I was keen to follow up on Maureen Reed's invitation to start a transdisciplinary and community-engaged research partnership.[8]

Maureen G. Reed: I was formally the principal investigator of the partnership, responsible for grant writing, stimulating and observing activities, co-developing evaluation instruments, working with others on analysis and presenting the results at academic and public venues. Informally, and at different times, I undertook a range of roles including cheerleader, nag, beneficiary, financial manager, analyst, co-presenter, co-author, and translator.

2. As you began your involvement, what did you want to get out of it? Did these expectations change over time?

Hélène Godmaire: Each project is an adventure for me, an experiment, and a challenge to reach our goals. Globally, my expectation is to make a change, progress, and a transformation of practices, to co-learn and co-create knowledge. Individually, my expectations were to learn more about the UNESCO-MAB Program, BRs' reality and achievements and to find out how they could improve their influence. I was also interested in gaining more experience in large partnership projects. I had no expectation regarding BRs' participation, since I did not know the collaboration dynamic. Overall, I am very pleased with the results. My expectations remained the same throughout the project; however, an additional one emerged. It concerns the way the UNESCO MAB Program functions. In my view, this structure (national and international) would benefit from getting BRs' feedback on needs, on capacities to achieve the broader mandate, and on communication, and from reporting and designing future orientations.

Dominique Potvin: My initial involvement was based on the strong conviction that individual BRs had much to learn from each other and that efforts in this direction should be supported. As we moved forward, it then became increasingly obvious that the learning concerned a wider

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[8] Marc-André Guertin and Maureen Reed have a friendly disagreement about who sparked this idea.

circle (i.e., one including a wider variety of groups) than the one initially targeted. Listening to practitioners allowed me to understand their needs better, thereby allowing me to identify how the Commission might support them better. It also confirmed to me that we shared a similar vision, goals and ideals, but operated at different scales. The Commission's involvement also relied on the notion that local communities are key in shaping the future towards sustainability, and that they are often the most appropriate for conceptualizing and implementing initiatives that would be impossible at a higher level, or if led only by the public sector. The end of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) was particularly appropriate to document these lessons. Ultimately, hearing directly from Biosphere Reserve representatives about their achievements and successes, and noting the value added and analysis by researchers and facilitators, contributed to re-energizing and motivating my own work.

Paivi Abernethy: I wanted to learn more about BRs as organizations and gain hands-on experience in social scientific field research, particularly in participatory action research. I became more engaged as the project evolved and became more and more fascinated both by our findings and about the BRs as organizations. I think seeing participants interact, especially the PI, facilitators and the BR representatives, and the way in which this social network has evolved throughout the process has been such an enriching experience that it has fundamentally changed my approach to research. I think a participatory component is indeed vital for successful and meaningful sustainability research—or social scientific research, in general.

Marc-André Guertin: As a new CEO, I became convinced that the network needed to learn from the knowledge and experience of each of its members. I felt it necessary at the time to bring the network members together to work and share more about what they did, not just on what they wanted to do or could not do because of lack of funding. Why not work together to appreciate our strengths and develop a common understanding of our mutual challenges? Why not stop and actually talk and reflect on what we do … maybe just for a few moments throughout the year. The national partnership gave us that opportunity.

Maureen G. Reed: If I were to summarize what I wanted, it was "success." I didn't have a clear idea of what this meant. I knew that whatever the outcome, I would be able to publish from the work. But I also wanted the BRs to shine. I wanted to see them succeed. I also wanted them to think well of me and wanted to ensure good relations that would continue to nurture our mutual interests in the long term. So, I was hardly a neutral observer. Practically, success also meant I wanted to do it all. At least, initially, I found it difficult to let go and let things unfold as they might. I don't think the expectation changed, but I realized almost from the outset that I was not able to do it all. I also began to realize in very practical ways the multiple talents, ideas, creativity and capacity for hard work that the partners brought to the project. Hence, I found the project fed me, professionally and personally, as we carried on. As I let go, I also took on roles as active learner and participant, rather than merely as principal investigator or leader. This made the experience truly joyful, despite the many bumps in the road we encountered.

3. What challenges, expected or not, did you experience? How were these addressed?

Hélène Godmaire: Our team (researchers/practitioners) challenges were shared with the BR coordinators, such as lack of time and money for BRs, staff turnover, distance and communication. Using Skype or GotoMeeting was, indeed, awkward. To overcome those challenges, we deliberately sustained collaboration, simplified and framed the tasks. To facilitate communication, the number of contacts was increased and rigorously planned. Transferring the project aims and the diverse scientific concepts behind partnership was challenging, as well as launching BRs' collaboration. Patience, perseverance, training and assistance helped the process. For most BRs, sharing their practices was natural; that helped others follow up.

Dominique Potvin: Identifying the appropriate and satisfactory level of collaboration concerning specific project elements was not always obvious. Indeed, team members did not always agree on the need or feasibility to seek group consensus on aspects judged to be mere detail to some.. When such cases arose, team member views were sought (enhancing validity but also necessary time and facilitation resources). While a certain level of flexibility is always necessary when working with a variety of organizations, the timelines (jointly established) were not always respected, thereby resulting in considerable pressure on specific partners. Another enduring challenge concerns the effective diffusion of project content and results to other communities.

Paivi Abernethy: Because of my role, I personally did not experience challenges, but I learnt a lot from observing the process. For instance, the very first workshop, in which a new opportunity to collaborate with like-minded people energized the BR practitioners, generated a momentary inflated sense of collective empowerment. However, connecting the ideals with BR realities after the workshop caused some frustration among the participants that could have been detrimental for the project. The PI immediately addressed the conflict situation by listening and hearing the concerns of all stakeholders, and respectfully, reflectively, guiding the partnership to a consensus was a very strong learning experience. Similarly, seeing the ways in which the project manager has facilitated the complex process of partnership development and combined her academic and practitioner skills to promote consensus building, in often sensitive situations, has been invaluable for my own personal development as an academic researcher.

Indeed, this research has cemented my desire to keep studying community-based initiatives in a participatory manner. Furthermore, the experience has shown how the complexity of cross-sectoral, multidisciplinary collaboration and the skillful facilitation needed for the process have been significantly understudied in academic research.

Marc-André Guertin: Many challenges awaited us as a national network engaging in a common project. Obviously the distance that separated all participants was a challenge but the partnership funding could help bring us together more often than our annual meetings, which are held once a year. The diversity of perspectives surrounding our BR work was also perceived as a challenge. For many practitioners, the diversity of projects conducted by BRs was perceived as problem because it made it more difficult to label and explain to stakeholders what BRs are

Marc André Guertin addresses biosphere reserve practitioners at the launch workshop of the partnership in June 2011. (Photo: Paivi Abernethy)

all about. The diversity of interests also made the development of common projects more difficult.

These challenges were then resolved partially by completing an inventory highlighting the diversity of projects conducted within BRs and by subdividing the partnership project by groups of interest. This was not imposed in any way but eased by the appointment of a facilitator. The list of challenges could be lengthier, but I think that one of the largest challenges faced in the partnership was the budget cut imposed by the federal government on the core funding the BRs had received since 2009. The funding was unilaterally cut a year early. We all wished the funding agreement could be renewed beyond 2013, so the cut came as a shock. This affected 15 of the 16 Canadian BRs. As in any budget cuts, staff and project development was affected. This had a direct impact on the partnership project. Two BRs were no longer able to engage in the project because they had no staff.

But these cuts did not have just negative outcomes. The partnership project definitely helped the BRs participate to support each other through these difficult times. The engaged BRs truly shared with one another their distinct realities. Some even stated that without the partnership project, they probably would not have been able to get through these difficult times. The national secretariat of our association was dissolved; these cuts obliged me leave my CEO position with CBRA. I remained involved in the partnership project as an academic researcher and a Canadian MAB Committee member with the Canadian Commission for UNESCO, even after the cuts.

Because of these cuts, the network's ability to link with one another and support one another was greatly reduced. Had it not been for the partnership, it might even have been brought to nothing. I believe the partnership truly brought the participating BRs together and offered them a chance to hold on to something they shared in common.

Maureen G. Reed: For me, the most difficult challenge, ironically, was maintaining participation from other academic collaborators. Because we regularly use email and Skype, I thought this level of engagement would be easier. Upon reflection, this is not too surprising as academics typically run many projects and the position of "collaborator" in a SSHRC grant is not considered a high level of commitment. Nevertheless, collaborators helped to prepare questionnaires, but few left their offices to join us for workshops or annual meetings.

Other challenges were logistical. I was not surprised when the federal government pulled its funding from the organization mid-way through the project in 2012, although the cut was heartbreaking and created an immediate set of challenges. The Community co-investigator had to take a new position, and it's only been through his stunning commitment that the original partnership remained strong. We juggled the tasks, so that this became more of a logistical

challenge (e.g., fund management fell back to me) than a death blow, and I remain grateful. In 2011, the Canadian network had agreed to host the regional meeting of North American and European BRs at a conference in October 2013. In 2012, they decided to maintain this commitment; however, the loss of core funding to the BR network meant having to spend more funds from the grant to ensure all BRs were able to send a representative to the EuroMAB event. Hence, there was less money to pay

Practitioners learn about human-wildlife management at the Long Point Biosphere Reserve in Ontario. June 2011 (Photo: Maureen Reed)

them for their time in completing the work and fostering more face-to-face collaboration. The facilitator and I applied for additional funds explicitly to support their attendance at the conference, but our application was not successful. Consequently, practitioners provided more volunteer hours than they originally envisioned. One cluster obtained external financial support and then paid for their members' attendance—a gift for which we remain grateful. Hence, the instability of the funding situation had ripple effects, positive and less positive, on the project.

4. What lessons have you learned by working in this partnership that inform the practice of transdisciplinary research and/or community-engaged scholarship?

Hélène Godmaire: The lessons learned include, among others, the importance of human characteristics including the capacity to share and support, the value and meaning of the project for the BR practitioners, expressing confidence in each other and keeping an open mind about the work. Researchers also had to learn humility and openness to ideas of BR practitioners. We also learned that we had to use a diversity of communication channels because one system did not work for all situations. We learned about the learning dynamic. These lessons included creating the right conditions for social learning, taking time to reflect on and critically evaluate practices, learning how to share knowledge and collaborate, and finding ways to identify complementary work and encourage synergies.

Dominique Potvin: There is a critical need to clarify expectations and roles of the various partners, in a written form, before entering into active engagement. Even in an environment based on trust and common vision, this is desirable to ensure both the smooth and efficient undertaking of work, and the appropriate recognition of each group involved.

Marc-André Guertin: My involvement in the partnership has greatly improved my understanding of community-engaged scholarship. Many practitioners within the network are volunteers that devote time and energy to their communities, to the cause of sustainable development, and like them, staying engaged in the project was my expression of devotion to the cause. Social change is not glamorous and easy, yet many of the practitioners are painstakingly supporting their organization and causes locally. I believe that in order to learn

from practitioners, engaged academics must open their minds and research approaches to their reality in order to truly appreciate the wealth of knowledge we can gain from their practice. It takes times, resources and effort, but the knowledge it provides is more closely associated to the challenges awaiting many organizations engaged in sustainable development. The reflections from this multi-talented, national partnership have strengthened my capacity for sustainability both as a practitioner and as an applied researcher.

Maureen G. Reed: A key lesson I have learned is to try to articulate roles more clearly and to seek help through all facets of such a partnership. Students, financial officers, practitioners, civil servants, volunteers of all descriptions—all play important, but different, roles in the smooth running of such a network. But the most important lesson is that of facilitation. Researchers do research, yet few of them have strong facilitation skills. Having someone skilled and dedicated to regular and open communication (with a wide range of participants), systematic assessment, and adherence to timelines is critical.

Another lesson I learned is that a solid foundation helps nurture a virtuous circle. We have been blessed by individual offerings through the course of the partnership. Taking advantage of such offerings requires careful listening, a heightened awareness to the broader landscape that the partnership offered, and an openness to thinking differently about how to achieve the objectives of the partnership.

5. *How has your involvement in the partnership influenced your understanding of community-engaged scholarship?*

Hélène Godmaire: This project fits along the continuum of a number of previous community-engaged scholarship projects in which I participated. But, going through the project and comparing it with previous ones, I consider this partnership initiative as exceptional, and this is probably due to the solid, relevant, and meaningful project orientations and the stance of the leading researcher (known and recognized), her humanness, her daring and openness to think outside of the box. The flexibility of research action and community of practice approaches, the commitment of the engaged, creative and talented participants, and a good combination of characters (people getting along well) who come with open minds were important elements of the community-engaged scholarship.

Dominique Potvin: It has reinforced the notion that the following elements are essential for success:
- plenty of time to develop trust and relationships;
- clear understanding of intentions and goals;
- platform for discussion and communication, that respects roles and responsibilities; and
- personal commitment and passion by all partners involved; individuals involved must believe in the process and be motivated by the collective undertaking/product.

Paivi Abernethy: This project was surprisingly successful considering the geographic, temporal, and financial limitations. I think we need much more explicit exploration of the

process dynamics in community-engaged scholarship—not the least because academics need to learn to share the driver's seat and find the balance between the academic and practitioner needs. For successful community-engaged research, the right kind of people need to be engaged to facilitate the process; a facilitator or facilitators who understand the different need to be involved and have the appropriate skills to build bridges between stakeholders. In this particular research, the academic team, especially the PI, was relatively successful at loosening the reins when managing the research project, but I think we could be better at it. Indeed, the challenge of balancing the needs as well as time and performance requirements set by funders, academics, and community partners is an art in itself.

Maureen G. Reed: Community-engaged scholarship means inhabiting your research. If I were to divide the expression "community-engaged scholarship" into three parts, Icould say I have a fresh understanding of each part. For me, BR organizations are part of a community of attachment and identity. They are a community bound by a common sense of commitment to the UNESCO ideals of "building peace in the minds of men and women"[9] and to the sustainability ideals embodied in the specific program (MAB) of which they are a part. I consider my work with the national network community-based research even though the organizations with whom I work are physically scattered across more than 6,000 km and five time zones.

In this context, engagement means many things. It means reading their advertisements and notices and keeping up with their daily rituals and responsibilities. It means being open to suggestion from all corners, especially if you think it takes the project on a tangent. Sometimes the best way forward is to take seeming detours into side paths. And I have learned to broaden my idea of scholarship. Through this work, I have written different kinds of articles, and have developed different skills and outputs (e.g., videos, brochures, workbooks, documentary film). Although these are not necessarily new, I have had to learn new-to-me skills in creating them. I have also learned compassion in research, mourning the losses with my companions and celebrating the rich successes we have achieved.

I've learned to laugh in my research. I don't say this flippantly. I mean I've learned to love my research companions as the family I choose and to take joy in their successes, my successes, and our collective efforts. We work hard together to address our mutual misfortunes, flaws, and misunderstandings. We construct and bear mutual criticism in the hopes that we can improve relations amongst ourselves and our ecological community members. We don't always agree, but we have common goals, overall. Hence, it's really important to always listen to find ways to embrace our differences and diversity and gain strength from our collective work. And we always laugh together. For what is the point of research if its inhabitants don't take joy in doing it together?

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[9] You can find the slogan on the banner of the UNESCO website at: https://en.unesco.org/

Synthesizing our Reflections

Our formal evaluation confirmed seven factors of success: trust building; common interest and shared vision; incentives; perceived value in sharing information; willingness to engage in collaborative learning and decision-making; effective information flow; and effective leadership (Reed et al. 2014). Our reflections here reinforce the need to build and *maintain* trust and to confirm expectations explicitly. We emphasize here that structured and multi-lateral facilitation was key to meeting addressing several of these factors. Finally, we believe that finding the sweet spot helped consolidate the work of the partners, raise their profile, instill a strong sense of pride in their accomplishments and provided an opportunity to celebrate.

Building and Maintaining Trust

Although the work of the partnership revealed that time and money were both common supporting and impeding factors for sharing and communicating, other intangible factors such as trust and value were just as important. Allowing the practitioners to define the next stage and providing time (three months) and support (work time of the facilitator) to complete an inventory helped build trust among all parties and allowed BRs a means to shape the project. BR practitioners saw this as power sharing through project determination. But we also needed to maintain trust. Maintaining trust was as simple and as difficult as regular engagement or, in the words of one of our participants, "communication, communication, communication." Despite contemporary virtual technologies, such communication remained difficult across the five times zones and the socio-cultural differences of the country. Uneven access to, and comfort with, tele-communications technology, and its rather stilted character for some without sufficient bandwidth meant that face-to-face meetings were critical for building trust over the course of the project. It was also at the face-to-face meetings that people dedicated their time solely to the project, rather than the thousand and one other projects they had on the go. In a sense, face-to-face meetings allowed for an opportunity to focus, reduced the number of tasks they were doing simultaneously, and nurtured the relationships required to maintain trust.

Clear and Confirmed Expectations

As pointed out earlier, trust, even among people of common interest and goodwill, is necessary, but not sufficient. Clear and confirmed expectations help all participants to remain on task and to meet inevitable deadlines. In our partnership, expectations were initially set out in individual "ententes" (memoranda of understanding) for some aspects of the project, but not for all. As new initiatives were established and as some practitioners' involvement waned following the funding cuts, ententes were not revised and new ententes were not created. Hence, in some groups, the load was shouldered unevenly by participants, and the lines of communication became blurred. Confirming expectations through regular communication and through written verification can help overcome the tensions that arise when assumptions and expectations are not met.

Establishing Structured and Multi-Lateral Facilitation

Key to this partnership has been the role of the facilitator who played multiple roles throughout the process, including catalyst, animator, translator, and mediator across levels in the network. She maintained regular contact with each cluster group and the investigators, ensured BRs met their information/organizational needs and targets, facilitated face-to-face meetings of the clusters, contributed to the application of research principles and concepts, and helped cluster groups plan activities and projects. The facilitator helped meet other conditions for success such as ensuring the effective flow of information and providing leadership through example.

But beyond the obvious work tasks, the facilitator had other skills that are difficult, yet critical, to encapsulate. The facilitator was multi-lingual. By this, we mean she could speak and write fluently in both official languages (French and English), and she could speak and write both academic theory and plain language. She had long experience working with community-based organizations, including BRs, as well as working in an academic environment. Hence, she maintained regular communications with cluster groups, academic researchers, and, when necessary, governing organizations (CCUNESCO, Canadian-MAB committee). She helped BR practitioners stay on track by providing them with concrete tools to enhance collaboration, such as regular meeting times, templates, milestones, and consistent encouragement. She also good-naturedly reminded researchers and governing organizations of the on-going commitment to collaboration, even when deadlines loomed and these groups sought immediate decisions.

Furthermore, the facilitator helped negotiate differences in participant interests and power relations. When possible, negotiation and decision-making were done by consensus. But given time, distances, and familiarity with funding rules, sometimes decisions were simply made between the principal investigator and the facilitator. The role of the facilitator was to translate concerns and interests of groups to others to engender empathy and understanding. This was an effective way to negotiate items such as funding, project outcomes, and perceived value of the work. In doing so, the facilitator helped to navigate and flatten power relations that might have otherwise been centralized within a steeper hierarchy.

While facilitation has been considered a significant contributor to social learning processes (e.g., Reed et al. 2010), new literature is emerging that points to a heightened significance. For example, building on work by Prince (2003; 2010), Macho et al. (2013: 1057) used the term "barefoot fisheries advisors" for people who "build robust social capital by acting as knowledge collectors and translators between fishers, managers, and scientists." Similarly, Cash et al. (2003) point to the need for knowledge translation to advance a sustainability agenda. Hence, such facilitators do not simply facilitate process, but they also facilitate knowledge exchange and build social capital among academic researchers, local practitioners or resource users, and policy-makers. Hence we agree with Wals:

> Ideally facilitators of social learning become skilful in reading peoples' comfort zones, and when needed, expanding them little by little. An important role of facilitators of social learning is to create space for alternative views that lead to the various levels of dissonance needed to trigger learning both at the individual and

the collective level. (Wals 2007: 498).

What Wals does not state, however, is that the role of facilitator is not restricted to an event or short time period. It is a critical need throughout such a project. Furthermore, given the scope of this partnership, the facilitator's role must also be structured, with multiple dimensions: multi-lingual, multi-cultural, multi-level, multi-lateral and multi-directional.

Finding the Sweet Spot

This factor is difficult to define. It refers to finding a point of resonance that will advance the partnership. For this project, the sweet spot was the EuroMAB event. This conference provided a focal point for the efforts of the BRs and an opportunity for them to showcase and celebrate their hard work. Without such a focal point, the networking may have seemed, to some, as busy work for the sake of busy work. Working on projects that span BRs is still new to many practitioners. Some also felt pressure from their board members that they were spending too much time on the networking tasks and too little time on tasks at home.

Showcasing their learning at a plenary event (with multiple workshops) helped demonstrate the value and learning of the partnership. Finding that point of resonance also allowed for other strands of activity to emerge. In our case, the establishment of a Working Group on Indigenous Peoples at the EuroMAB conference came out of the recognition that BRs were not sufficiently engaging the indigenous peoples in their respective communities. While this shortcoming had been recognized for some time, hosting the conference brought this gap forward to the international community, demonstrated that other BRs in the international network shared the same challenge, and provided an added impetus to work together to make change. Hence, there was greater enthusiasm for addressing this gap than if it had simply been a challenge for the Canadian network.

Closing Comments

Our partnership offered an opportunity to weave together theory and practice in ways that were mutually reinforcing and beneficial. This is both the promise and the challenge of community-engaged scholarship. We refuse to conclude because the partnership and our learning are on-going ventures, even though the funding has run out. Instead, we close with a couple of observations from within our group.

Hélène Godmaire: While searching for tools and strategies, we found that UNESCO defined the field of Environmental Education as "a learning process that increases people's knowledge and awareness about the environment and associated challenges, develops the necessary skills and expertise to address the challenges, and fosters attitudes, motivations, and commitments to make informed decisions and take responsible action" (Tbilisi Declaration, 1977). This declaration inspired some members in the work we shared. Finding new ways of doing, thinking, participating, empowering, building capacity and mobilizing and linking scientific knowledge with local and experiential knowledge proved to be beneficial for project members and contributed to our achievements. The latter exercise was probably easier, but

both were very fragile depending on resources (financial, human resources). Both required careful guardianship and transparent communication.

Marc-André Guertin: A work colleague once told me that there is nothing more practical than a good theory. I guess that there are many not-so-good theories around because scholarly knowledge is often perceived as useless by practitioners. Maybe useless is too strong an affirmation, but let's say disconnected from everyday needs and imperatives of practitioners! As a former practitioner, I recall being caught up in conservation, restoration projects and even field research. Very rarely did we take the time to evaluate and reflect on our actions beyond the simple requirements of our funders and government partners. Even though some of our projects were very innovative and produced outstanding results rarely did we stop and think to evaluate our practices and maybe even share these results with others.

About the Authors

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