Exchanges

In the *Exchanges,* we present conversations with scholars and practitioners of community engagement, responses to previously published material, and other reflections on various aspects of community-engaged scholarship meant to provoke further dialogue and discussion. We invite our readers to offer in this section their own thoughts and ideas on the meanings and understandings of engaged scholarship, as practiced in local or faraway communities, diverse cultural settings, and various disciplinary contexts. We especially welcome community-based scholars' views and opinions on their collaboration with university-based partners in particular and on engaged scholarship in general.

Below, **Sarah Buhler** and **Nancy Van Styvendale**, two of the co-editors of this special issue, talk to **Phaedra Hitchings, Chantelle Johnson, and Stan Tu'Inukuafe,** who are three community-based educators and partners of university CSL projects in Saskatoon.   The participants introduce and situate their connections to community service-learning and discuss the challenges and opportunities of community service-learning and partnering with universities from their perspectives. Phaedra, Chantelle and Stan sat down with Sarah and Nancy at the University of Saskatchewan's Community Engagement Office located at Station 20 West, a community enterprise centre in Saskatoon.   In the exchange, the participants introduce themselves and their longstanding involvement with CSL projects and university partnerships. They engage in a critical and wide-ranging conversation about the benefits and challenges of partnering and working with universities from their perspectives and experiences in the field.

Conversations on the Challenges and Opportunities of Community Service-Learning with Phaedra Hitchings, Chantelle Johnson, and Stan Tu'Inukuafe in conversation with Sarah Buhler and Nancy Van Styvendale

Nancy Van Styvendale: Please introduce yourselves and your connections to community service-learning.

Chantelle Johnson: I am the Executive Director at CLASSIC (Community Legal Assistance Services for Saskatoon Inner City), which is a community legal clinic here in Saskatoon that provides legal services to people who are living on low incomes. We provide experiential learning opportunities for Law students and also some Social Work and Political Science

Chantelle Johnson at her desk in CLASSIC

undergraduate students. We have our walk-in advocacy clinic, where law students work on client files under the direct supervision of supervising lawyers. The students can come to us for a full term's credit or as volunteers. We also have a legal advice clinic where volunteer lawyers come and give free summary advice sessions; law students assist them. And finally, we have a Systemic Initiatives Program where students can take a six-credit course at the law school and work on experiential projects at the clinic that are more systemic in nature than individual client files. Our Social Work students float between the systemic work and the individual client file work on the walk-in advocacy clinic side. And the Political Science students do lots of research and writing to assist our work.

Phaedra Hitchings: I'm Phaedra Hitchings and I'm the Regional Coordinator for Frontier College for Saskatchewan.[1] Frontier College is Canada's original literacy organization – it was founded in 1899. We work in places where there are barriers to accessing literacy and numeracy supports, and today that means places like shelters, remote communities, prisons, etc. All of our programs in Saskatoon are within the core neighbourhoods or with people who are currently incarcerated. And then, in Saskatchewan, we also work with summer literacy camps all over the province.

Phaedra Hitchings promoting literacy and numeracy programs in an event in Saskatchewan

Frontier College, all throughout its history, has had university students connected to its work. Volunteer tutors are the basis for what Frontier College does and why it can reach so many people. We deal with a lot of different community service-learning courses or programs—from the University of Saskatchewan particularly, but some other institutions, too, like Saskatchewan Polytechnic. Students come for either short-term or longer-term periods. Their involvement could be directly tied to a class, or part of a program, like the Criminology and Addictions certificate program. Students come from Medicine, Pharmacy, and Arts and Science more generally. We work with lots of people who are interested in going into Education or Social Work and are using

[1] Note that Phaedra is no longer in this role, having assumed the position of executive director for the Saskatchewan Literacy Network.

community service-learning through their classes to help towards that goal.

I should say that before I worked with Frontier College, I worked at the University of Saskatchewan as a community-engaged learning specialist and community service-learning program coordinator for about eight years. So, I have experience working with community service-learning from that programming side, institutionally.

Stan Tu'Inukuafe: I am a social worker at Oskayak High School, Saskatoon's Indigenous High School. I also work, in different capacities, with an organization called STR8 UP. STR8 UP provides support to men and women who are leaving gangs. In both

positions, my experience working with the university is supervising graduate students or undergrad students who are interested in social work primarily, but also undergrad students who come from institutions like Saskatchewan Polytechnic. I have also worked closely with university partners to develop and teach a community-based class called Wahkohtowin, which brings together university students, Oskayak High School students, and members of STR8 UP in a class that focuses on issues relating to justice.

Stan Tu'Inukuafe in conversation with community partners and students during Wahkohtowin

Nancy: Thank you all. Next, I was wondering if we could talk about motivations—either personal motivations for doing this sort of work with students, or if it's more of an organizational mandate, then perhaps you could speak to the motivations of your organization.

Stan: For me, the motivation is at different levels. From my perspective as a school social worker, my motivation to take practicum students is that they bring fresh ideas. They're eager to learn, so they energize you when you've been involved in the work for a long period of time. From my perspective within STR8 UP, one reason we are engaged with the university is that it is important for our members (who are former members of street gangs) to see that they have a contribution to share that no one else is able to share. There's a level of knowledge there, and they're able to see that. From this perspective, we are helping to educate members of the university community, and it also indirectly raises the profile of STR8 UP. Primarily, those are my motivations to be involved, because I believe that the university plays a role in the community, and at different levels.

Sarah Buhler: Thanks Stan. Chantelle, what about you? What are the motivations behind

CLASSIC's involvement in CSL?

Chantelle: With respect to the organizational component of the question, at CLASSIC, we have a dual-pronged mandate. Providing training and experiential learning opportunities for students is part of our mandate. For me, personally, when I initially came to the work, I came for the social justice part of our mandate. But I completely agree with Stan that the infusion of energy and excitement that the students bring to the work that we do is really energizing. It's sometimes also exhausting. But I think, over time, we are changing the way our alumni view the law and want to practice law. We know this because it's the alumni who are our number one source of people who want to volunteer in the legal advice clinic, who want to be on our board or on committees helping, and who want to do pro bono work in some other way.

Sarah: One thing I hear you saying is that it's not just about getting students to help with the immediate work at hand, but it's a larger vision for transforming, in your case, the legal profession more broadly. So it's a way of getting at that larger social change.

Chantelle: And that's the really cool thing that you see with the interdisciplinary nature of the students. When you see the Social Work students and the Law students talking about how interconnected their work is, and when you see them have those "Aha!" moments, it's brilliant. It's great to see when they figure out how that kind of interconnection should be the way of the future.

Phaedra: There are so many things that I can relate to in what I've heard already. To add to it, "Why work with universities in particular, compared to other academic institutions?" Universities, I think, perhaps more than some other post-secondary institutions, have fewer opportunities for practical application of what students are learning in theory. I really believe in community service-learning as a way to help students test out what they're learning, and then they can decide: "This is really something I want to do with my life," or "I love this work, but I don't actually believe in this kind of model. I want to help change it," or sometimes they find out this isn't something they want to spend their lives doing. I think that's all really valuable. And I do think that's a gap for universities—they are great at many things, and there are some practical opportunities, but I believe community service-learning complements these greatly.

For Frontier College, all of the ongoing programs are done with mostly student volunteers, and, in Saskatchewan, most of those student volunteers are through community service-learning programs. It makes a lot of sense for what we do. CSL (as opposed to just volunteering) is helpful because it provides structure and consistency for the students, the learning partners, and the organization.

Having students involved also raises awareness about our organization, but, more importantly, awareness of literacy issues and how literacy impacts society and everybody

in it, not just people who have lower literacy levels.

Nancy: I am wondering if you can speak to the CSL model and whether it provides something useful to your work, as opposed to the volunteer model? I am thinking in particular of the emphasis in CSL on critical reflection and intentional learning—where students are actively thinking about what they're doing in the community and the relationships and the work that they're engaging in.

Phaedra: In my experience, I think there could be even more emphasis on critical reflection. The reflection piece is a tough one to build in. I have often met with students to help them reflect on their experiences and what they are learning. I think it helps that I have an idea of the learning goals from a university perspective. I find it interesting when students test out the theories they have learned in the classroom. For example, a student might challenge something we are doing based on something they learned in class, but then this gives me an opportunity to explain why we are structured the way we are and why we do things the way we do. I can explain the real-life constraints that might be preventing us from doing something that theory would tell us we should be doing. It's an interesting exercise sometimes in battling idealism. Not that idealism is bad, but you have to find a balance between theory and the realities on the ground.

Chantelle: We totally see that—especially with the students who come with a social justice bent and they get so discouraged by the systems, and then we say, "But you need to work within the systems that we do have."

Phaedra: I had one student who was angry at the injustice she was seeing. And I encouraged her: "Ask those questions! Figure out what it is that's bothering you. Figure out where your role is in that." She was going into Pharmacy. I challenged her: "Figure out what role you can play in making it so that you're not part of that system that made it so that this happened."

Nancy: It sounds like as community partners you are doing a lot of what I would call "emotional labour" with students.

Phaedra: I think so. Not with all of them, but definitely.

Chantelle: I have realized that too. There is a need to figure out how to balance that work with students with the work of keeping our doors open!

Sarah: Have you had to handle problematic situations with students?

Phaedra: Those can be very challenging situations, especially if a student thinks that they

know more than they do. And sometimes students do not value the front-lines wisdom of our participants, of the staff in our partner organizations, or me. There can be resistance to that knowledge—that it's not valuable, that it didn't come from a textbook.

Stan: Yeah. For example, sometimes we get a student who has gone through their own struggle with addictions. They sometimes are rigid in their beliefs because what worked for them must work for everyone, and they're not open to new ideas. They approach others through the lens of, "You have to go do this," whatever "this" might be. They don't realize that someone else could heal in a different way, or it might take a little longer. So we look for flexibility in the students we work with.

Sarah: This conversation connects with our next question, which is: what are your observations about the ways in which the university works with or engages community and community partners? I'm thinking in terms of the expectations that are either spoken or unspoken, or that you take on as part of this work, including the emotional labour.

Stan: In my experience, in a few projects I have been involved with, I have identified a need and approached the university. And this meant I was trying to figure out which department would be the right fit for what it is that we were trying to achieve. But my other experience is getting approached by the university or university students who need something, like to fulfill a requirement for example. And so even though I have experience working with the university, I still think there's an unequal level of power. It often feels like the university will work with us as long as it is on their terms.

Chantelle: It's incredibly bureaucratic.

Stan: Yeah, on their terms, right? As much as I think people at the university want to work with the community, I still think, today, it's on the university's terms. It's not really an equal, level playing field.

Chantelle: Oh, I completely agree.

Phaedra: I would say something very similar, too. We go to the university. It's very, very rare that the university goes to the community. Very rarely would university partners come and ask what we might need. There is not as much organized appreciation or consultation with community partners, in my experience, as there could be. I think there's a lot of power that could come out of being in the same room with each other, when all partners involved in a CSL program are together and able to share. I see this with our collaboration with the College of Pharmacy, for example.

Chantelle: And in my experience, there are different levels of engagement depending on

who you're dealing with on the university side. With a lot of the bureaucracies, it's on their terms. I think a lot of the assumptions are probably unintentional and based on different levels of privilege. CLASSIC is working on a memorandum of understanding with the law school now to try to better reflect the symbiotic relationship we have with them. It is also useful to have an understanding in place so that when there is turnover on either side, you have something that governs that relationship, no matter who the individuals at either of the organizations are.

Nancy: One thing that seems to me to come up all the time is the resources issue and how community partners are often implicitly expected to give time and resources to keep CSL programs running. Are there observations you would like to share about that?

Phaedra: I think part of it is that on the university side there is sometimes an assumption that the organizations are the only ones benefitting from CSL. It can take convincing that the university benefits greatly from this partnership also. That part is missing for a lot of people. I think there's a lack of awareness that it is work for the community organizations as well. Yes, there's benefit, but I value that I'm contributing to university student education, also. If I didn't, I probably would not spend as much time with students, especially the ones who have presented challenging situations to us. Because it is part of the education that these students are getting, it's a different kind of endeavour on our part [than working with non-CSL volunteers, for example]. I would not put in the effort I do working with students if I didn't believe in helping the university education of those students.

Chantelle:: The reciprocity is rarely a consideration, and that's that big assumption again.

Stan: My experience with the university is that when a department calls us to do a presentation about our program—where our members tell their stories—sometimes I'm hesitant because I wonder what the purpose is. Are we just coming in there to showcase individuals and you just want to hear it, feel good, and then that's it? Some professors just like that one-off type of stuff. Like, do a little hour, we're gone, we're done. Usually I say no to those requests, unless I know that their students are going to do something with the information.

Chantelle: In our case, our organization's funding for the client side of our mandate is subsidizing the experiential learning side of the work we do. There's been the assumption that we're getting a sheer benefit, and there's been the assumption that we absolutely need the students. But in fact we are providing experiential learning, and the people who work at CLASSIC are not only good lawyers, but good educators. Working with students is a lot of work if you're going to do it well. There's a lot of emotional support. And we've saved a lot of people in law school who absolutely hated law school and then found CLASSIC as their reprieve. It's interesting.

Nancy: The next question is about the benefits of working with students—I know we've already talked about energy and new ideas—as well as the limitations.

Phaedra: All of the critiques are not to discount the fact that it is beneficial to have community service-learning partnerships. It is beneficial to have the students be a part of the work that we're doing. That's still true. I don't know why we would do it, if it wasn't the case. Even if the person doesn't stick around with us beyond their community service-learning programming, that's just fine. They have more awareness about what we do and about literacy and how they can integrate that into what they're doing, or want to do in the future, and that's wonderful.

Stan: For us, it's very beneficial, and we sometimes see long-term relationships with students who have been involved and a long-term impact. The impact is not always immediate.

Chantelle: In terms of benefits, I agree that the longer-term changes are key. We're now seeing people who have been through our programs and who think differently about their professional area as a result of their time with us. Overall, despite the limitations or frustrations, the benefits tip the balance.

Phaedra: In terms of the limitations of working with students, one of the frustrations is that we don't always know the goals of the community-service learning course. We don't always even know that they're approaching us as a community service-learning student.

Nancy: Are you finding that instructors are saying that as part of their course, students need to get a certain number of hours in the community, and then students just go and contact organizations themselves?

Chantelle: Yes, and I think especially right now, because even if it's not a requirement, it's a recommendation [for the course]. If you have an economy like we have right now where it's really hard for people to get jobs, they want to do absolutely everything they can to put them at an advantage.

Phaedra: And it's not a bad thing to have people join for reasons that are less than totally altruistic. People can still learn from the experience, and we have our screening and training processes to help make sure it's still a good fit. But communication from the university is really important. I sometimes get students and I don't know what class they're in or what the goals of that particular course are.

Chantelle: I know. With some students and certain volunteer opportunities it feels like volunteer voyeurism or something, where they just, like, land in.

Phaedra: Another limitation is that sometimes students aren't aware of the reality of what community work can look like—that sometimes something is cancelled and you don't get to do your placement that day, and it has nothing to do with them. It's just sometimes that happens. Or something comes together very last minute.

Chantelle: Yeah, that fluidity.

Phaedra: Yeah. And that really throws a lot of students. And lots of times, too, they can take it as a fault, either in something that they've done or something that we've done or something that the community service-learning programming has done or not done. But this is just the way work happens in our context.

Sarah: That leads into our last question, which is how can community service-learning and other community-engaged learning be done in a way that's most beneficial to communities? Do you have ideas or recommendations or things that you've experienced that have been a really positive way that the university has worked with you?

Phaedra: For sure. If programs or instructors have a very purposeful intent as to who the partners are, that can make it so that it's a lot easier to have those conversations about what's expected, what's happening, if something's going weird. Same, I imagine, when you [the student] have somebody to contact, you know what's happening. Even if the contact person at the organization changes, you have somewhere to go.

Chantelle: I think communication is so important. And sometimes the community-based organizations need to be clearer about their capacity and more communicative about how many students they can take.

Stan: Sometimes you get a student and it's a lot more work than you anticipated. We developed an intake form for students to fill out and send to us in advance. That's a process that allows us to filter people, because the questions are designed to see if they're a right fit for the organization. That's how we've adapted. But at the same time, schools sometimes get upset because we're not taking their students. And we give them the reasons, but they're still not happy.

Chantelle: It would help to have someone at the university to act as a liaison.

Stan: Exactly.

Phaedra: I'm sure it's also challenging from the side of the instructors who are trying to navigate a system—a large system. From my experience in community service-learning, I also think tenure-track faculty are often discouraged from getting involved in community

projects, and so that's why the majority of community service-learning happens with sessional lecturers and very new instructors. And then, if those people leave, the program usually goes away, unless there's a coordinating body that helps to keep it going.

I think it would be worthwhile to have a more dedicated conversation amongst community partners and university people to discuss the common things that we need to work well together. There's enough commonality across the community service-learning placements that I think this could be done. This would allow us to say to students, "If you're going to be in a community service-learning placement, here are things you need to know." It's something that's worth considering if CSL is going to be a model that's still pursued, but I recognize that there are educational trends amongst universities and community service-learning is not immune to that ebb-and-flow of popularity.

Nancy: In some of the conversations I've had with community partners over the years, there is a sense that standardization is a tricky thing in these relationships…

Chantelle: You need to evaluate it and it needs to be applied with discretion, but some parameters would be great.

Nancy: Because a lot of this work happens in a very informal way, which can have its benefits and can allow us to work in ways that are not constricted by the bureaucratic structures of the university, but then there also needs to be accountability and consistency.

Chantelle: You need a happy medium because, conversely, having autonomy is really good, and not being rigidly structured, but then if something does come up where you don't have anything to govern you, you actually have to spend a whole bunch of time maneuvering the bureaucracy anyhow.

Stan: What about personal relationships between community partners and university researchers or instructors? Do you have any comment on the role of relationships between people in the university and yourselves?

Phaedra: I think they are very, very key. Sometimes the institution does not understand the importance of this aspect. We need to build a culture of valuing those relationship-building practices rather than only focusing on "outcomes."

Nancy: With the continued corporatization of the university, there seems to be a shift away from that valuing of relationship building. There is a focus on outcomes and everything has to be quantified.

Phaedra: I think there is a strong push for this, to make limited funds go further, and to justify spending money where they do. It's hard to convince them that building relationships is in

the best interests of the business of the university.

Stan: I firmly believe that relationships are important. We need to know if we can trust the people we are working with. And that develops over time. That's the key: time.

Chantelle: I feel like the thread throughout our discussion today has actually been communication, trust—and that's all relational.

Nancy: That's a perfect note to end on. Thank you all for taking the time to meet with us today.

About the Participants

Phaedra Hitchings has been working in collaboration to combine community and learning for over 13 years. Currently the executive director for the Saskatchewan Literacy Network, she previously worked as Saskatchewan's Regional Coordinator for Frontier College, and Community Service-Learning Coordinator at the University of Saskatchewan. Email: slned@ saskliteracy.ca

Chantelle Johnson has been the Executive Director of CLASSIC (Community Legal Assistance Services for Saskatoon Inner City) since 2012. She has B.A. and LL.B. degrees from the University of Saskatchewan.   She has previously worked with the Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission, with the Child Sexual Exploitation Unit in Edmonton, as Crown Counsel in British Columbia, and as an intern at the Indigenous Law and Justice Branch in Australia. Email: chantelle_j@classiclaw.ca

Stan Tu'Inukuafe has been supporting those involved in the criminal justice system for the past ten plus years. He is married and the father of four beautiful girls. Stan currently works as a school social worker at Oskāyak high school in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Email: stuinukuafe04@gmail.com