
Learning to “Walk the Talk”: Reflexive Evaluation in Community-First Engaged Research

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ABSTRACT While a considerable body of literature advocates for participatory evaluation methodologies within community-centred community-campus engagement (CCE) projects, there has been limited study to date on how a “community-first”, or community-driven approach to CCE may be informed and strengthened by reflexive evaluation practices. Reflexive evaluation involves a critical reflection on the positionality of participants in relation to the processes they are engaged in and attempting to influence. In response to this gap, this article develops a reflexive account of our activities and influence, as academics, within an evaluation of the first phase of the multi-year pan-Canadian CCE project known as Community First: Impacts of Community Engagement (CFICE). Building on the experiences of community and academic partners across a collective reflective evaluation of over forty demonstration projects within Phase I of CFICE, we reflexively examine our own efforts to incorporate common community-first CCE working practices into the evaluation processes to which we contributed. This examination reinforces scholarly assertions about the crucial position of community voices in co-governance of CCE projects, the need to reduce institutional constraints to community participation, and the value of nourishing relationships within CCE work. The approach explored in this article complements more general evaluation methods for practitioners seeking to ensure accountability to community-first values in their work. The article also explores how reflexive evaluation can inform practitioners about deeper personal and collective introspection and transformations related to relationships and processes associated with employing community-first CCE working practices.

KEYWORDS co-governance; community-campus engagement; evaluation; reflexive evaluation; community-academic co-creation

The call to prioritize community goals in community-campus research and teaching partnerships is well-articulated in the academic literature (Bortolin, 2011; Dempsey, 2010); however, it is clear that responding to this call in practice can be challenging (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Cronley, Madden, & Davis, 2015; McIlrath, 2012; Rice, Lamarre, Changfoot, & Douglas, 2018). There is also considerable discussion in the scholarly literature of how to evaluate community-campus engagement (CCE) projects, with many scholars advocating for participatory evaluation methodologies that incorporate both community and academic perspectives (Greenhalgh,

Jackson, Shaw, & Janamian, 2016; Hart, Northmore, & Gerhardt, 2009; Weerts & Sandman, 2008). Within the evaluation literature there is a growing emphasis on reflexive approaches that actively encourage critical reflection on the positionality of participants in relation to the processes they are engaged in and attempting to influence (D’Cruz, Gillingham, & Melendez, 2007; Mitev & Venters, 2009; van Draanen, 2017). Despite this growing interest in reflexivity in evaluation, however, we have found no studies that consider how the theory and practice of community-centred CCE can be informed and strengthened by reflexive evaluation processes.

In response, we present a case study located at the intersection between the theory and practice of “community-first” CCE and a reflexive evaluation methodology, with a focus on the positionality of academics. This article revisits the collaborative evaluation of the first phase of Community First: Impacts of Community Engagement (CFICE), a seven-year pan-Canadian action research project (2012-2019). CFICE aims to better understand and support communities and campuses working together effectively for a healthier, more sustainable, and just society. Through a “retrospective reappraisal” (Mitev & Venters, 2009, p. 736) of our activities and influence as academics within the collective evaluation activities of Phase I of CFICE (which takes place, in part, within the process of writing this article), we ask: How does a reflexive evaluation *process* enrich our understanding about what a community-first approach to CCE means in both theory and practice?

CFICE partners understand “community-first” CCE as synonymous with community-driven or community-centred CCE. In Canada, growing interest in building mutually beneficial relationships between community and campus actors has led to a proliferation of research and teaching partnerships across the country. However, critiques regarding the tendency for CCE practices to privilege postsecondary institutions by paying insufficient attention to the needs, priorities, and expertise of the community partners involved are equally relevant in Canada (Levkoe et al., 2016). Responding to these critiques, CFICE is employing a community-first approach by investigating ways to ensure that CCE partnerships maximize the value created for non-profit, community-based organizations (CBOs). CFICE involves collaboration among over thirty Canadian universities and colleges (with an institutional home base at Carleton University, situated on unceded Algonquin Territory in Ottawa) and over sixty CBOs (for more details about CFICE, including its organizational structure, see the introduction to this special issue of *Engaged Scholar Journal*).

This paper revisits the comprehensive evaluation of Phase I of CFICE that took place in 2016 and early 2017, and is organized around three community-first working practices, synthesized from the scholarly literature on CCE, which were reinforced and elaborated upon through the collective evaluation among community and academic partners of over forty community-level demonstration projects. We describe these working practices as follows:

- 1) Establishing project co-governance by community and academic partners that is suited to their respective goals and capacities
- 2) Ensuring postsecondary institutional policies and practices enable respectful and impactful partnerships for communities

3) Nourishing the relationships that serve as the cornerstones of successful CCE projects.

In writing this article, we reflexively examine our efforts as academics to incorporate each of these practices into the Phase I evaluation process. Our assessment draws on personal reflections and review of our involvement in evaluation processes such as focus group data collection and analysis, with a particular focus on our activities related to the preparation and execution of a research and evaluation symposium organized by community and academic project partners in January 2017.

The four authors of this article are academic members of the CFICE Evaluation and Analysis Working Group, who played active roles in the collection of evaluation data and analysis as well as symposium planning. Community-based practitioners have also played extensive roles in CFICE, whether in co-leadership of CFICE, in the co-leadership of our working group, on the Community Advisory Committee (discussed below), and in CFICE's hubs and projects (including in the evaluation of those activities, particularly towards the end of phase I¹). This article, however, does not presume to speak for them and their experiences in CFICE. Community members have co-authored CFICE-related academic articles (e.g. Andrée et al. 2014; Levkoe et al., 2016), but they don't always choose to express themselves through this medium, nor should they be expected to. Community participants have other means of sharing their reflections and experiences with academics and with one another. This journal article is thus written by academics for a mixed academic and community audience.² As co-authors of this account of the Phase I evaluation process, we committed to a critical and reflexive analysis with the intention of improving our own practices as academics, sharing lessons learned with other engaged scholars, and enhancing the value of CCE for community partners and for progressive social change. We write as individuals examining our own positionality within postsecondary institutions within CCE processes. As Mitev and Venters (2009) point out, such an analysis must also acknowledge our limitations and failures.

The narrative we present in this paper is one step in an ongoing and iterative process of reflexivity in our practice. It is also a critical reflection on our collective approach to evaluation within CFICE in order to present an account of attempting to "walk the talk" as academics in a community-first partnership project. In this paper we describe a case study of the evaluation of Phase I of CFICE, specifically, the collective dimension of the evaluation whereby community and academic partners participated in evaluation activities at the project level, as well as a two-day CFICE Community Impact Symposium where further critical reflection took place to advance learnings from the evaluation process. This symposium helped to chart

¹ For an example of an evaluation report from one of CFICE's phase I hubs, see: <https://carleton.ca/communityfirst/2016/report-community-environmental-sustainability-hub-evaluation-synthesis/>

² For a community partner perspective on the activities described herein, please see the addendum to this article written by Colleen Christopherson-Cote of the Saskatoon Poverty Reduction Partnership. Colleen is community co-chair of the CFICE Evaluation and Analysis Working Group. This addendum was included in response to a reviewer's query about the community viewpoint. It is simply meant to offer one additional perspective, and does not presume to speak for all community participants within CFICE, just as we cannot speak for all academics involved.

the course and directions for the second phase of the project (2016-2019), and deepened participant appreciation of the impact of the work as well as the limitations of what was achieved. Through our reflexive examination of this case study, we reveal avenues through which a reflexive approach may enhance more general forms of participatory evaluation for CCE practitioners seeking to ensure accountability to community-first values and principles in their work.

Community-First CCE, Reflective Evaluation, and Reflexivity

At the heart of community-first approaches to CCE are activities that allow community and academic partners to define collaborative goals, share expertise, and carry out projects of mutual benefit, thereby building productive and meaningful relationships that are grounded in trust (Ochocka & Janzen, 2014; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000; Weerts & Sandmann, 2008). Practicing community-first CCE, especially within academic institutions where epistemic injustice towards traditional, Indigenous, and community knowledges remains widespread, demands a respectful, collaborative approach to engagement at all stages of research design, data analysis, and knowledge mobilization (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Zusman, 2004). Community-first CCE may also require changing institutional structures and practices to be more respectful of community partners and their needs (Levkoe et al., 2016).

Community-first CCE working practices

In this section, we identify three key working practices for fostering community-centred environments in CCE work by synthesizing the scholarly literature. The first working practice involves establishing equitable co-governance by community and academic partners that is suited to their respective goals and capacities. Co-governance may be described as multiple actors working together to meet shared decision-making goals (Kooiman, 2003). More than simply involving co-ordination among partners, co-governance implies that participants are co-producers of outcomes and share equitably in the development of different paths and processes (Paquet & Wilson, 2011). In practice, co-governance schemes are typically designed to be flexible, reflexive, and adaptive to enable social learning to take place (Vos, Bauknecht, & Kemp, 2006).

Within a CCE context, rather than conceiving of CCE relationships as academic-led empirical investigations, Zusman (2004) argues that relationships between academics and community groups/social movements should evolve from a shared commitment to social justice and the production of knowledge as a collaborative and mutually beneficial process. CCE scholars highlight the value of community advisory groups in reinforcing this approach by broadening the diversity of perspectives among CCE practitioners, facilitating communication and learning between community and academic partners, and offering a designated space for reflection among peers (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Broad, 2011).

A second key working practice focuses on ensuring postsecondary institutional policies and practices enable respectful and impactful CCE partnerships for communities. Scholars contend that community and academic partners may be unprepared to navigate the realities

of conflicting schedules and inadequate funding within CCE projects, and that the time and effort required to participate may be significantly more than anticipated (McIlrath, 2012; Mitchell, 2008; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Worrall, 2007). Holland (2001) and Gelmon (2003) also note that evaluation of CCE requires significant resources and effort for community partners, for which they are often not adequately compensated. These realities highlight an institutionalized lack of respect for community knowledge and time that often exists within academic structures.

A third working practice is that personal relationships lie at the heart of meaningful and effective CCE. It is important for partnerships to nourish the relationships that serve as the cornerstones of successful CCE projects. In practice, however, relationships may be more transactional than transformative between partners, and academics may prioritize their own research advancement over achieving meaningful outcomes at the community level (Clayton, Bringle, Senor, Huq, & Morrison, 2010). There may also be continuing tensions around differences in the understanding of what constitutes research by community and academic partners. For example, while some of CFICE's community partners were interested in shorter-term, practical outcomes, the academics involved often focused on critical and contextual approaches to research that fit within their discipline's expectations. Continuity and momentum may also be stifled as projects and relationships change over time (Ochocka & Janzen, 2014; Sullivan et al., 2001; Weerts & Sandmann, 2008; Worrall, 2007). These challenges reiterate the importance of partners maintaining open communication about their varied needs and concerns, and of adopting context-specific approaches to CCE (Littlepage, Gazley, & Bennett, 2012; Sandy, 2007; Stewart & Alrutz, 2012; Weerts & Sandmann, 2008).

Community-first evaluation practices in CCE

Proponents of community-centred CCE suggest that a community-first approach can also be applied to the evaluation of CCE projects, particularly in reflection on and dissemination of project learnings (Greenhalgh et al., 2016; Hart et al., 2009). Such an approach is a response to previous assessment efforts that had predominantly served the interests of academic participants, or had placed priority on measurable results over processes relevant to communities (Gelmon, 2003; Holland, 2001; Rubin, 2000). To meet the needs of all partners involved, evaluation in CCE is envisioned as an ongoing learning process that is best established when a partnership is in its initial stages (Gelmon, 2003; Rubin, 2000).

Reflective evaluation practice has gained prominence over the last several decades in resistance to top-down managerial approaches that emphasize reductionist performance-based measures. Reflective evaluation highlights appreciative inquiry and value for participants (Cooper, 2014; Marchi, 2011). When a collective reflective approach to evaluation is effectively applied within CCE projects, community participation is valued for widening perspectives regarding the naming and assessment of positive, detrimental, or sustainable outcomes (Greenhalgh et al., 2016; Pillard Reynolds, 2014). Learnings are communicated in ways that take into account diverse narratives, interpretations, and languages among community and academic partners, allowing assumptions and standards to emerge which become points for

potential change (Allard et al., 2007; McCormack & Kennelly, 2011). Participants understand the complexity and changing nature of community-campus partnerships, and build in opportunities to alter course if required. Viewed in this context, evaluation findings are not simply prescriptive but also aspirational (Hart et al., 2009; Holland, 2001; Martin, Smith, & Phillips, 2005; Rubin, 2000).

A reflexive approach to evaluation further builds on reflective practice to “challenge systemic stability and support processes of learning and institutional change” (Arkesteijn, van Mierlo, & Leeuwis, 2015, p. 99). Drawing on aspects of collective reflective practice, this approach applies varied critical and appreciative methods of inquiry, examines process over results, and values lived experience and narratives in building deeper understandings and new paths (Allard et al., 2007; Cooper, 2014; Marchi, 2011; McCormack & Kennelly, 2011).

In our view, a reflexive approach can be distinguished from reflective evaluation in two key ways. First, it assumes that evaluation, at its best, should be willing to challenge the “path dependency” or “deep structures” of relationships and processes in complex systems in order to redefine those structures where necessary (Arkesteijn et al., 2015, pp. 101-102). Second, reflexive evaluation requires that participants consider their own positions in relation to the evaluation, as well as the potential of these positions to influence evaluation processes and outcomes in multiple ways. Reflexivity is thus understood as “reflection with an understanding of positionality” (van Draanen, 2017, p. 373). Participants challenge personal assumptions and biases involved in the production of knowledge, and consider how relations of power and wider structural contexts may influence this process (Arkesteijn et al., 2015; D’Cruz et al., 2007; Mitev & Venters, 2009).

This paper seeks to demonstrate how a reflexive evaluation *process* can enrich our understanding about what a community-first approach to CCE means in both theory and practice. Drawing on the scholarly literature presented in this section, we reflect on experiences within the CFICE Phase I evaluation process through the following key questions: How were community partners involved in designing and executing CFICE evaluation processes and in defining ongoing knowledge mobilization processes? What efforts were made to ensure community needs and priorities were foregrounded? Were institutional constraints to respectful community engagement recognized and addressed? Did evaluation processes nourish the relationships at the heart of CCE partnerships, or did they introduce unresolved tensions? Following a presentation of the CFICE Phase I evaluation process, we respond to these questions focusing on the three working practices for community-first CCE.

Evaluating Phase I of CFICE through a Collective Reflective Approach

During Phase I of CFICE, our partnership focused on supporting CCE that advanced sectoral policy priorities determined by our community partners, while critically examining the obstacles to, and strategies for, optimizing the community impacts of the partnerships in four sectors. The structure of the project team during this phase consisted of five hubs, with each

led by a community and an academic co-lead³:

- *Community Food Security/Sovereignty*, co-led by Food Secure Canada in cooperation with the Canadian Association of Food Studies
- *Poverty Reduction*, co-led by the Vibrant Communities network (coordinated by Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement)
- *Community Environmental Sustainability*, co-led by the Trent Community Research Centre
- *Violence Against Women*, co-led by the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies
- *Knowledge Mobilization*, co-led by the Canadian Alliance for Community-Service Learning.

Most of the hub work involved developing, implementing, evaluating, and sharing the results of a series of community-driven demonstration projects. The Knowledge Mobilization Hub managed its own demonstration projects while also providing knowledge mobilization support for CFICE as a whole. Each of the hubs adopted a context-specific approach informed by the partners involved and the history, culture, and structure of the sector in which they were working. Across the project, CFICE community and academic partners contributed to a diverse set of forty-one demonstration projects that ranged from locally-focused and modestly-scaled activities to broader national-scale initiatives. While the demonstration projects were spread across the country, the co-leads held regular meetings and came together regularly through program committee meetings by teleconference or in-person in Ottawa.

The collective evaluation of Phase I of CFICE that was initiated in 2016, involving community and academic participation, was intended to further CFICE research about how to maximize the value for CBOs in CCE, as well as to enrich an ongoing developmental evaluation process that had been established within CFICE to refine its own practices in community-first CCE. The process was initiated by the CFICE Evaluation and Analysis (EA) Working Group, an informal group established three years into the project at a time when we realized that our decentralized approach had led each hub to adopt its own evaluation processes. At that time, it was unclear whether we could generalize—for the purposes of developing robust answers to our research questions—from the data being collected within each hub. In response, the EA Working Group decided to build on the existing evaluation tools used by the various hubs, develop a set of standardized questions, and coordinate a comparable process of evaluation data collection across all Phase I community and academic partners. Table 1 summarizes main elements of the evaluation process.

³ For more details on the CFICE Hubs and specific demonstration projects see <https://carleton.ca/communityfirst/sector-specific-work/>

Table 1. CFICE Phase I evaluation timeline

<u>Evaluation Data Collection:</u> Completion of evaluation question template Focus groups and interviews with CFICE partners (CBOs, faculty, students) Review of reports generated within hubs during Phase I	April-June 2016
<u>Evaluation Data Analysis:</u> Individual evaluation summary reports generated within the five CFICE hubs Analysis across broader CFICE project summarized within evaluation symposium background documents	July-August 2016
<u>Evaluation Symposium Planning:</u> Symposium agenda planning Establishment of Community Advisory Committee (CAC)	September-December 2016
CFICE Community Impact Symposium	January 2017

Evaluation data collection and analysis

Our primary method of gathering evaluation data involved focus group sessions and one-on-one interviews with community and academic partners within each of the five hubs. In most cases these sessions were led by academic hub co-leads with help from student research assistants, working with standardized questions developed by the EA Working Group. Questions were designed to be broad and promote discussion about CCE in general, including experiences gleaned by partners beyond their CFICE-supported projects. Some hubs chose to add, remove, or modify the common questions—in some cases significantly—to suit the unique needs, priorities, and contexts of hub projects, to respect the time constraints of participants, and to identify an appropriate language for discussion among community and academic partners. Within some hubs, focus group sessions were held over multiple days and included participants from across Canada. In some cases, demonstration projects were underrepresented in focus group/interview sessions. Other evaluation data were drawn from written personal reflections by individual partners, reviews of demonstration project reports (which in several cases also included project-specific evaluations), as well as reviews of research presentations/documents submitted by CFICE community service-learning (CSL) students and graduate research assistants.

Following the initial gathering of data, each hub prepared an evaluation summary report. Report writing was typically led by academic partners, with coding of data often undertaken by student research assistants through a process of in-depth readings of discussion notes/transcriptions and hub documents. A graduate research assistant from the EA Working Group assembled cross-hub evaluation summaries from individual hub summary reports. Upon completion, the individual hub and cross-hub summaries were shared with all CFICE partners

and became part of a briefing package that was used as the basis for the Community Impact Symposium discussions.

Evaluation symposium planning

The CFICE Community Impact Symposium was conceived as a forum to celebrate the achievements of hub partners over the first phase of the project and continue work on the next stages of research, including defining policy change goals and strategies for improving CCE in Canada. The symposium was also designed to bring together knowledge and experiences from hub partners across Canada, to discuss key themes emerging from the evaluation, and to determine potential directions for further partnership in knowledge dissemination and mobilization of evaluation learnings. Efforts were made to ensure a balance of community and academic perspectives, which meant the organizing team had to turn away (alongside careful explanations of our intention to keep participation balanced) some of the faculty member researchers and research assistants who had hoped to attend. To ensure strong participation and offset the costs of symposium attendance for community partners, CFICE provided honoraria and made available travel bursaries to two community partners from each hub.

Though most of the logistical elements of symposium planning were undertaken by academic partners largely based at Carleton University, we aimed to adopt a participatory approach to planning, recognizing early on a fundamental requirement to ensure that the symposium framework, themes, and agenda aligned with community priorities. In keeping with our community-first approach, the EA Working Group animated a Community Advisory Committee (CAC) to ensure community partners were co-creating the symposium agenda, and invited community partners that had participated in the CFICE hub demonstration projects to join. While all community partners were invited to participate in the CAC, participation was not as geographically and thematically representative as originally anticipated. Still, participants from Ontario and British Columbia contributed significantly to the final agenda and symposium format. In the months leading up to the symposium, the CAC met monthly by teleconference with two members of the EA Working Group to discuss priorities for the symposium agenda and post-symposium knowledge mobilization outputs. The CAC was clear that community partners would not accept a traditional format where academics simply present findings to an audience. Community partners wanted to be in dialogue with academics and play an active role in furthering understandings of community-first CCE during the event. They also sought spaces where community partners could participate in discussions beyond their own respective hubs and independently from academics.

With regard to specific symposium agenda planning, the CAC recommended that community voices open the symposium to align with its intended community-first approach. The group also supported having an individual lead the symposium that could ensure balance and representation of both community and academic needs, experiences, and interests. Dr. Randy Stoecker, who has written extensively about the importance of community voice in defining CCE processes (for example, see Stoecker & Tryon, 2009), was invited to facilitate the event. Stoecker was well regarded by both academic and community participants in CFICE,

and had previously worked with some core CFICE partners. In developing the agenda, Stoecker and the symposium planning team worked together over three months, informed by monthly input from the CAC, as well as input from the program committee during two of its meetings that occurred during the symposium planning stage. During agenda planning Stoecker regularly pressed symposium organizers for greater transparency, for prioritizing of space for community needs to be discussed, and for clarifying and meaningfully accommodating the different objectives of community and academic attendees—some of which were coincident and some independent. Through negotiation, the agenda evolved to include a mixture of small group activities and larger group discussions. These included spaces that were community-led (e.g. a discussion on decolonizing CCE and meaningfully enacting reconciliation practices in CCE), spaces that were academic-led (e.g. discussion groups led by Phase II working groups to solicit needed input to move forward), and spaces that were both community and academic facilitated (e.g. developing recommendations for CCE institutions). Evening social events were also planned to encourage further informal exchange among community and academic partners.

CFICE Community Impact Symposium

The Community Impact Symposium was held at Carleton University over two days in January 2017. While hub co-leads had met on a regular basis over Phase I of CFICE, the symposium was the first event in which a larger group of academic and community representatives beyond co-leads from all hubs were brought together in one space to participate in a collective evaluation. Highlights from the first day of the event included a welcome from Paul Skanks of Kahnawake (a Mohawk Nation in Québec), interactive activities intended to familiarize participants with one another, opening stories from Community Advisory Committee representatives reflecting their achievements and challenges within the project, and activities intended to identify common lessons among partners. The second day focused on identifying recommendations for specific audiences (discussed below) that were grounded in partners' collective experiences. Each day also included unplanned open space sessions and considerable networking time, as both were identified as priorities by the CAC.

A large part of the symposium was focused on assembling key recommendations directed at governments, funders, community-based organizations, postsecondary institutions, faculty and students to better support community-first CCE practices. Example recommendations for governments are found in Table 2 below. Following the symposium, a survey was administered to garner participant feedback, and a symposium summary report⁴ was then prepared by the CFICE secretariat and reviewed by CAC members. Special attention was given to featuring quotes and perspectives from community participants, and to including feedback received through the survey.

⁴ See <https://carleton.ca/communityfirst/2017/5985/> for the report, including a full recommendations document.

Table 2. Sample recommendations for different audiences developed at the CFICE Community Impact Symposium

Audience	Recommendation
Governments (provincial, federal, local)	Provide greater institutional and funding supports for strong CCE partnerships between postsecondary institutions and the non-profit sector.
Funders	Join collaborative networks as equal partners (not simply the holders of purse-strings) committed to expanding CCE in Canada and beyond.
Postsecondary Institutions	Provide resources for community partners that work with postsecondary institutions (e.g. on-line library access, space for in-person meetings).
Faculty	Develop a strong set of CCE working practices (e.g. recognize and value community knowledge/expertise epistemologically, and where possible with honoraria).
Students	Actively seek out opportunities to enhance and co-create CCE skills and capacity (for example, by drawing on their own previous involvement in community contexts), and mentor other students based on those experiences. Respect student experience in and knowledge of community.
Community-Based Organizations	Develop peer-to-peer opportunities for information exchange and collaboration among CBOs about how to engage with postsecondary institutions.

Regarding Phase I evaluation outcomes, community and academic partners expressed preferences for a diversity of approaches to sharing CFICE findings moving forward. They requested a range of outputs that would include more conventional formats (such as policy reports, academic papers, and newspaper articles) as well as other contemporary means of communicating findings (videos, email updates, webinars, blogs, and other social media outlets such as Facebook Live events). One community participant noted:

I do not think the medium is as important as a commitment to ensuring that the output is as meaningful, accessible, and potentially useful to community members as it is to academic participants. The next step is surely how to co-create some of these outputs.

As Phase II of CFICE progresses, community and academic partners have been creating outputs through a variety of media to disseminate specific hub learnings and impacts. The general recommendations gathered at the symposium have also been translated into briefs

and other formats for specific audiences, including funders, provincial government agencies, community organizations, and more.

Discussion: Looking Back through the Lenses of Three Community-First Working Practices

While the scholarly literature documents many positive experiences and tangible outcomes for community practitioners from projects based in a collaborative ethos, in practice, community-first goals are often constrained by a range of systemic barriers (for example, see McIlrath, 2012; Sandy, 2007; Stewart & Alrutz, 2012). The exploration of community-first approaches that we employed within our own projects has allowed us to consider the micro-practices that have made a difference in furthering community-first goals, those that have not, and resulting tensions within CCE projects. In this section we present our reflection on the CFICE evaluation process through the lens of three key working practices that were part of our learnings across hubs from Phase I, and which correspond with scholarly observations presented earlier in this article: establishing co-governance, institutionalizing respect, and nourishing relationships. In the subsections below, we relate each working practice to the CFICE Phase I evaluation process, reflexively focusing on how each element of the evaluation did or did not align with these practices.

Establishing co-governance

Our evaluation across CFICE hubs revealed there were many instances where power imbalances manifested between academic and community partners with regard to governance within Phase I projects. Project progress and communication were constrained in these cases, stemming from such issues as misaligned timelines, priorities, and objectives. For example, the deadlines required by academic institutions and funding agencies did not always align with those of community organizations. Further, the practical needs and intended outcomes of community projects differed from those of faculty researchers and students. We learned from these experiences that a collaborative governance structure that explicitly creates space for honest (and sometimes difficult) conversations can support a shared decision-making process; foster open discussion of project goals, expectations, roles, and challenges; and support discussion around fair standards regarding ownership of research knowledge and outcomes. Our evaluation also revealed that difficult conversations within hubs were not always resolved, and that hubs sometimes approached co-governance in different ways.⁵

In reflecting on how we conducted the evaluation of Phase I, we have identified many points at which CFICE partners employed sincere efforts towards co-governance of the direction and outcomes of the evaluation process. For example, when common questions were being developed at the outset of the evaluation, we recognized that there were additional evaluation

⁵ For details on how different CFICE hubs approached the challenge of co-governance, see: Nash, C. (2018). The ABCs of CCE: Sharing Power. (<https://carleton.ca/communityfirst/2018/the-abcs-of-cce-sharing-power/>); Nash, C. (2018). The ABCs of CCE: Sharing Resources. (<https://carleton.ca/communityfirst/2018/7355/>); and Nash, C. (2018). The ABCs of CCE: Sharing Responsibilities. (<https://carleton.ca/communityfirst/2018/7344/>)

methods already underway within individual hubs that could complement our broader efforts. These included an annual evaluation process undertaken by Poverty Reduction Hub partners at a community summit, as well as interviews taking place within the Violence Against Women Hub that involved questions on partnership-based work similar to those planned for the larger CFICE evaluation project. The Community Food Security/Sovereignty Hub conducted an end-of-project evaluation that involved a workshop at a national conference, one-on-one interviews and an email survey that was compiled into a major report. The only hub to significantly modify the original CFICE evaluation questions was the Community Environmental Sustainability Hub-Peterborough-Haliburton, which did so orienting to the over 20-year long history and culture of CCE in Peterborough and Haliburton and future direction to the partnerships within the hub. These hub-specific calibrations also included discussion and negotiation among academic and community partners of evaluation deliverables for CFICE overall as a SSHRC funded partnership to ensure that partners' needs were addressed.

We also noted that while both academic and community partners recognize the value of evaluation work, hubs differed in their evaluation focus. For example, within some hubs there was less of a focus from community partners on evaluation (which was based on the original deliverables of the research project) and instead a greater interest in employing project funds toward what they considered more impactful efforts associated with furthering their mandates as organizations. In these cases, they often deferred to academics (or in a few cases to outside consultants) to define the initial terms of evaluation, with community partners then providing input on subsequent evaluation details. In other hubs, community partners did focus on the evaluation for process and impact of hub specific projects, and used the evaluation results to start new projects and secure funding, building upon co-governance established during Phase I. We also found that despite our best efforts, there was an imbalance in representation within some of the hubs in evaluation focus groups, which was often due to a lack of resources to support participation from community partners. In addition, analysis of individual hub data and writing of evaluation summary reports were undertaken primarily by faculty and student research assistants; while many community partners were consulted during this process, we acknowledge that a distinct imbalance occurred in this work, which we discuss below.⁶

We became aware that the goal of maintaining an equitable distribution of control over evaluation efforts among community and academic partners would not always be realistic or desirable. A division of labour may occur within CCE work, with academics taking on a larger proportion of reflective tasks related to data analysis and writing, while community partners devote limited resources to more immediate project co-ordination and engagement with research participants (though we recognize that within some projects, and even within some parts of the CFICE process, community partners take the lead in organizing and executing

⁶ It is important to distinguish here between community participant involvement in the overall Phase I evaluation of CFICE (which was significant, but uneven, as described in this section), and the question of community participation in the reflexive process of preparing and writing this article. In the case of the latter, all CFICE participants were invited to contribute to this reflexive process (through an invitation distributed in the CFICE newsletter), but it was only the academics who had actively played a role in the evaluation working group who chose to carry this particular reflexive project forward; hence the positionality associated with this piece.

data analysis and writing activities). We are aware that it is important to reflect on what this means in terms of the power to define the results, but we also recognize that such a division of labour may suit the availability and preferences of partners. Recognizing these limitations, we made deliberate efforts to ensure that the Community Impact Symposium included equitable representation from academic and community partners, to provide opportunities for community participants to consider and assertively respond to the evaluation data that academic partners had assembled within hub and cross-hub evaluation reports. This decision meant we had to inform some of our academic colleagues (including students) that they could not participate in the symposium, despite their interest in doing so. As we had hoped, we received validation at the symposium from community partners that our evaluation results reflected the shared experiences, in general terms, of those who participated.

The aspiration for co-governance was an important part of the rationale for establishing the CAC. It was intended to strengthen the participatory approach to the event, to build upon community-campus relationships set in place during Phase I of CFICE, and to base the symposium framework on themes that aligned with community priorities and voices. This approach set the foundation for a very rich process of symposium planning that involved continuously decentring the academic position, considering how academic and community perspectives differ, maintaining sensitivity to power relations, and working towards a common language.

During their meetings associated with symposium preparation, CAC members made it clear that power and the influence of CFICE as a largely university-influenced project should be made explicit in symposium discussions. They drew attention to the influence of the university in terms of academic language (and how academic-informed meaning largely prevails or takes over when academics are present) and research agendas (over community research agendas and goals). As one example, CAC members advocated for a more collaborative approach to prioritizing research ‘outputs’ (i.e. the means by which learnings would be shared) coming out of the CFICE Phase I evaluation effort up to and including the symposium. CAC members maintained that community and academic partners understand outputs in different ways, with one member suggesting that processes in service of a community vision, such as conversations between stakeholders, were considered valid outputs for communities (in contrast to what may be considered by academics to be typical outputs such as journal publications, conference presentations, or reports).

Symposium planning also greatly benefitted from Randy Stoecker’s commitment to ensuring that participatory-based processes were a core component of the agenda. Throughout the planning process, he asked clarifying questions that forced greater reflection within the planning committee on the intended purpose of the symposium (i.e. on its community-first goals). In discussions with Stoecker, the planning committee came to imagine how to provide different kinds of spaces to address the needs of both community partners and academics as noted above. At times these conversations were difficult, such as when, for example, specific project participants (usually academics) wished to use the symposium to further specific working group goals or to generate specific outputs. It was challenging to plan a time-finite

symposium that allowed for the multiple and complex range of needs and reasons associated with individual community and academic attendance. Stoecker's moderating—employing an iterative approach to the symposium agenda, and altering course when required in response to participant feedback over the two-day event—maintained the focus on community perspectives and priorities within symposium discussions. Following the event, many symposium participants commented that the gathering met key community goals (by, for example, ensuring lots of time for sharing community partner stories and networking), fostered a collaborative environment for the development of community-first recommendations for CCE, and formed a critical step in co-governance of the evaluation process between community and academic partners.

Institutionalizing respect

This working principle identifies a need to change institutional structures to ensure that beyond simply treating people well, participation by all partners is valued throughout a CCE project. We discovered through our own CFICE evaluation across hubs that in practice, even small efforts toward community-first CCE (with regard to showing respect or acknowledging power differentials) can make a big difference. Still, we need to more clearly discuss both capacity and compensation of community partner participation going forward, and the reciprocity associated with this.

Our evaluation revealed that community partners often had difficulty navigating administrative hurdles within Phase I as members of the overarching CFICE project, which involved complex reporting requirements as well as slow bureaucratic timelines. The general model of providing modest grants to CBOs within individual hub projects, while appreciated, sometimes became burdensome for community participants. We learned that best practices for institutions and funders employing a community-first approach involve acknowledging and compensating for the significant time and resources required of community partners to participate in CCE projects, as well as supporting community partners in negotiating administrative bureaucracy. A community-first approach also incorporates first-voice perspectives from community participants and broadens understanding of the value of 'non-traditional' research beyond typical academic-centred outcomes.

Within our evaluation process, access to funding and other resources became a prominent constraint for many community organizations to meaningfully participate in CFICE evaluation activities. Community partners noted that it took significant resources, time, and energy to participate in evaluation focus groups, as for example focus group sessions required significant travel for some partners. As a result, demonstration projects were underrepresented within hub evaluation reports in some cases. To address funding concerns for communities during the next stage of the evaluation, we incorporated various forms of resource support to facilitate community partner attendance at the Community Impact Symposium, including honoraria and travel bursaries for community participants upon request.

Despite our best efforts to access meaningful funding for communities, we repeatedly came up against barriers originating from within the academic institution, including the limited amount of funds earmarked for community partners in CCE work, top-down directives from

the research funder and Carleton's research office about how we should spend these modest amounts, and lagging timelines for receipt of funds by community participants. As the CFICE project is primarily funded by SSHRC, academics are required to take responsibility for the research funds, which gives them ultimate accountability for signing off on all expenditures. In this respect, while we had attempted to equitably share control of project decision-making with community partners, institutional structures limited our ability to do so. Moving forward, CFICE administration is working to influence change in SSHRC funding relationships with community partners to reflect this need for greater power-sharing between partners regarding access to and distribution of research funds.

Nourishing relationships

Within the first phase of our CFICE work, we learned that meaningful relationship-building emerged out of long-term and continued collaboration among CCE participants. CFICE partners valued opportunities to expand their networks and build deep connections and trust with other participants, made possible through multi-year commitments and funding that were part of the CFICE model. We also learned that a community-first approach prioritizes in-person communication where feasible, fosters a common and accessible language among participants, and recognizes that allowing for 'messy' conversations, especially those involving transparency of funding and related issues regarding the power of the university, can aid in strengthening understanding across diverse perspectives. Over the course of Phase I of CFICE, academic and community co-leads from each hub came together three times a year for in-person program committee meetings in Ottawa as part of an ongoing reflexive evaluation process. While these events took up significant resources and time, responses to our evaluation identified that time put aside to share successes and challenges at these meetings was extremely worthwhile. Community participants noted that they valued these spaces for celebrating successes in CCE work, but also for fostering opportunities for difficult conversations about thorny issues that sometimes came up within hubs and across the larger CFICE project.

Within our evaluation process, we highlight the Community Impact Symposium as a notable effort in reinforcing the value of in-person communication in nourishing CCE relationships. Community participants commented that the symposium format offered many moments for meaningful relationship-building and the development of common understandings among partners. These opportunities unfolded as symposium participants shared stories and informal conversation during daytime meeting periods, and as they participated in evening dinner events designed to strengthen social bonds, network, explore areas of tension, celebrate our successes as a group, and informally plan next steps together.

Our commitment to honouring relationships with CCE partners continued following the symposium, through the distribution of a survey to solicit feedback and reflections from symposium participants about their impressions of the event and actions moving forward. Respondents noted they appreciated the connections they made with other symposium participants, and the understanding gained of how different CFICE hubs, working groups, and committees were working together to advance CCE work. Participants also valued

opportunities to work together and learn from each other, to meet other participants from across the country, and to engage with others in informal settings during evening social events. They also appreciated the responsive approach to symposium facilitation that allowed for flexibility in the agenda and opportunities to change course in symposium discussions over the course of the two-day event.

Moving forward, we are increasingly oriented and attentive to the range of transactional and transformative facets of our relationships with community partners, mindful that key to our relationships is reciprocity. In our positionalities as academics, we are learning that part of nourishing relationships is to listen to community partners' expectations and needs, as well as to share our own needs as academics ready for ongoing adaptation and recalibration.

Conclusions: Lessons from an Exercise in Reflexive Evaluation

Reflexive evaluation has allowed us as academics to attune and productively question more deeply our own positionality through personal and collective introspection, and transformations related to the relationships and processes available within the praxis of community-first CCE. Partnerships are never straightforward, and taking a community-first approach to CCE is a complex endeavour. We contend that reflexive evaluation is critical for academics in CCE to anticipate the frictions arising from our institutional structures over recognition or validation of this work (Sandmann, Saltmarsh, & O'Meara, 2016)⁷, the centring of the academic perspective because of systemic power differentials between community and the academy (even when we ourselves as academics are highly committed to centring community and maximizing community impact), and the distance these structures can create between academia and community. Reflexive evaluation also offers us opportunities to reflect on how we as individuals working within these structures support or set barriers to community-first CCE, whether consciously or unconsciously.

In writing this article, we have reinforced the importance of really listening to community partners within evaluation activities, and of supporting the development of academic structures that make room for diverse needs among CCE practitioners (while not assuming that CCE can do everything for everyone). Reflexive evaluation anticipates and *welcomes* tensions between partners anew with each project, not because partners are not committed to working with one another, but because of the high degree of specificity of reasons and needs for participation among partners, and as part of the co-creation of processes and developing relationships in partnerships. These tensions can be exciting and productive for creating new contexts for the development, recalibration, and strengthening of relationships. Meaningful co-governance of evaluation projects among community and academic partners may be both difficult and messy, but it is a worthwhile aspiration.

Among the many occasions where we endeavoured to “walk the talk” as we undertook the

⁷ In 2018, Kira Locken provided an introductory analysis within our project, highlighting the differences in meaning and value of research, teaching, and service between current university criteria for tenure and promotion, and the experiences of faculty involved in community-engaged scholarship. Change is anticipated and underway to value CCE. See <https://carleton.ca/communityfirst/?p=6676>

multiple steps in our evaluation process, some aspects of the process did not turn out exactly as we had planned. With regard to a participatory process, we are aware that community partners were at times placed in positions of providing feedback on pre-established ideas and structures set by academics within the evaluation, though this awareness also highlights an ongoing concern among academics about balancing inclusion with respecting the time and resource constraints of community partners. We also discovered there may be unintentional effects associated with institutional support for CCE projects; for example, our decision to hold the symposium at Carleton University (an academic institutional space) was part of a well-intentioned effort to cover event costs, but we could also ask what might have been gained by meeting in a community space for these discussions, and what resources a community partner would require to host such an event? Lastly, we learned that nourishing CCE relationships also requires that we recognize moments where community partners may prefer to communicate with each other to advance CCE work without an academic presence.

The symposium planning, including the format and roles of community and academics in the event, is an example within CFICE of how community and academics learned to work together in a new way, distinct from the demonstration projects at the hub levels which largely took a sectoral approach. The collaborative approach experienced, particularly within symposium planning, offers the experience of a co-created community-academic space that is structural, cultural, and attentive to power relations, comprising awareness and acknowledgement of community and academic needs that are at times the same, similar, different and/or in tension with one another. Actors within this new co-created knowledge space acknowledge power differentials and tensions between community and academy while also sharing enthusiasm and desire for continued collaboration, and importantly, share a vision for maximizing the value of community-first CCE work.

The CAC continues to be an important structure for community involvement within CFICE, and has been assigned additional resources for meetings and for the incorporation of priorities from this committee into the Evaluation and Analysis Working Group. Though the group has experienced some obstacles to maintaining its momentum—reflecting underlying time and resource constraints for community partners within CCE projects—they are actively developing several ongoing peer-to-peer engagement activities to learn from each other, share successes, and explore other opportunities to participate in community-campus partnerships.

As in van Draanen's (2017) experience, our continued reflexive approach in writing this article has led us to pay attention to where we as academics may have maintained control over the shared ideas coming out of the evaluation process, where we distortedly employed academic terms that excluded some, and how we made decisions about what was important to know within the evaluation learnings that we disseminated. We also remained aware of cautions associated with a reflexive approach—that it may be employed to pre-empt criticism or serve as “self-indulgence” that “may serve to reinforce [the authority of the researcher] rather than challenge it” (D’Cruz et al., 2007, p. 78; van Draanen, 2017). Well-intentioned efforts we undertook throughout the evaluation process—including soliciting community input during the interview/focus group process and in symposium planning through the CAC, engaging

a symposium moderator well respected by community and academics, and participating in challenging discussions within the symposium organizing committee around the multiple and complex needs associated with community and academic symposium involvement—led to new imagined ways of organizing symposium spaces, and supported an approach that we believe was more attentive to hearing and centring community voices. Still, there were limits within that process that warrant consideration in the development of future projects, including how to involve community partners even more deeply in the undertaking of evaluation and examining assumptions that evaluation events be held in the academy, for example.

Moving forward from this evaluation project, we believe we are only scratching the surface of what is possible in truly “walking the talk” in community-first CCE. Evaluation has become a fundamental part of our CFICE work, well-suited to a long-term project. We recognize that reflexivity involves constant practice (D’Cruz et al., 2007), just as evaluation in general within CCE offers continued and incremental opportunities for learning (Gelmon, 2003; Rubin, 2000). As the process of synthesizing and mobilizing CFICE learnings coming out of the evaluation of our first phase continues, we look to ongoing institutional support and resources to ensure that dissemination of evaluation findings employs a community-first perspective. We also continue to nourish the relationships that have brought such meaning and progress to our community-first CCE efforts thus far.

Addendum

A response to ‘Learning to “Walk the Talk”: Reflexive Evaluation in Community-First Engaged Research’

Colleen Christopherson-Cote, Community Co-Lead Evaluation and Analysis Working Group and Phase I Poverty Hub partner (Saskatoon Poverty Reduction Partnership Coordinator)

As an active member of the Phase I: Poverty Reduction Hub of CFICE, I was honoured to be part of the symposium outlined in this article. My role as Community Co-lead in the Evaluation and Analysis working group was established after this meeting. I was eager to participate as a community voice on this project in order to help balance perspectives and work in a collaborative community-first manner.

In keeping with the practice of community-first CCE, I was asked by the authors of this article to reflect from my community perspective. It is important to note that the work I do in community is situated in Saskatoon, SK, in Treaty 6 Territory and the traditional homeland of the Métis, and is reflective of the circumstances, practices, policies, and perspectives associated with social determinants of health-based community development.

In reading the article I was excited to see that the three core priorities (co-governance, policies and practices, and relationships) were identified as the critical elements of community-first CCE. Upon finishing the article and reading through the best practices, recommendations, barriers, and key learnings, I was struck that from a community perspective, I would re-organize

the three priorities as (1) relationships, (2) policy and practice, and (3) co-governance. While you, as the reader, may be thinking that this is the semantics of language and presentation, I would caution you to reflect about the impact and power of academic language and presentation in the relationship of community-first CCE.

As a community practitioner who predominantly works in systems-level policy and practice, relationships are the key to accomplishing any of the work we set out to do. Without trust, reciprocity, and identification of the power imbalances that infiltrate the colonial systems we exist in, community development would be extremely difficult. For this reason, I am suggesting that the partners who set out to work in a community-first CCE approach be mindful of the role language, organization, hierarchy, power, and practice play in the day-to-day operations of a CCE project.

Building relationships is an ongoing and never-ending practice in community-first CCE, and in community development in general. Without these solid relationships, moving forward on policy, practice, and eventual co-governance of projects would be next to impossible. Over the course of the six years that I have been working on projects in Saskatoon rooted in community-first CCE, I have been to more coffee meetings than strategic planning sessions or policy/governance meetings. One of the key commentaries in the article speaks to the value and resourcing of community relationship-building. Often outcomes and skills associated with building relationships, community capacity building, and/or community investment are ineligible for funding, looked at as “fluffy”, and/or assigned to “side of desk” despite everyone in the process stating the importance of nurturing these relationships.

In the article the authors speak of the reflective evaluation process, and offer some of the barriers associated with this process from an academic perspective. It is important to note that the barriers, particularly associated with resourcing, language, and evaluation are not disrupted without relationships that are built on the grounds of equity, safety, reciprocity, and trust. Working alongside the many partners of CFICE, I have witnessed tremendous growth around inclusive practices and policies, including the creation of the Community Advisory Committee (CAC), community-based outputs, and inclusion of community voice in academic outputs and funding associated with inclusion at meetings. The processes and policies that intersect between academy and community, specifically about funding, are often fraught with complexity and practices that discourage inclusivity. Speaking specifically about the funding relationships between the academy and community, it is interesting to reflect that in theory we all articulate the importance of community-first reflective evaluation-based practices, yet when push comes to shove and funding is being awarded, the three priority areas (relationships, policy and practice, co-governance) are the first things to be flagged as non-compliant within the expectations, accountabilities, and limitations of funding agreements.

Part of the commitment from CFICE partners has been to call out these imperfect practices and policies and work within our internal structures to question efficacy, relevance, and appropriateness of these policies. My first experience navigating the academic-based expectations for travel was an eye-opening one, and left me almost nine months without repayment of expenses. It was inappropriate that the system expected me, as a community

partner working in poverty reduction, to carry a large expense for that time period. It created a situation where I believed that my participation was of lower value and made me question additional connections to the project. After months of negotiations and numerous internal conversations within the academic partners' networks, policies about community partner travel were changed. This is a small but extremely important example of how working with CFICE and within a mindset of community-first CCE has collectively improved relationships, policy, and practice, and ultimately co-governance within CCE projects.

My final thought is about the intricacies of language, communication, and outputs. Everyone knows that every sector, agency, area of study, and community has its own set of language. Acronyms, histories, interconnections, and context increase the complexity of this work. Working alongside the CAC and CFICE academic partners, I have seen the appreciation and understanding for each other's complex systems evolve. Community partners often complain that academic outputs are "less than useful" while academic partners often counter with "community outputs lack the rigour of academic research". Working in a community-first manner recognizes the two perspectives and meets in the middle, creating outputs that are unique, understandable, and useful for all partners.

As the Community Co-lead of the Evaluation and Analysis working group of CFICE, I have watched the transformation of community-first CCE ebb and flow. The complexity of the work is eloquently captured by the authors and their call for self-reflection and system-reflection to make changes truly focuses on building a community-first approach. This work cannot, and should not, be done without both system and self-reflections. Each player in the process, policies, practices, co-governance structures, and networks has a role to play in the creation of space that is ethical, safe, rooted in reciprocity, honours relationships, challenges policy and practice, and leads to co-governance of CCE that is community-first.

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