

Co-Authorship with Community Partners as Knowledge Co-creation

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ABSTRACT This report from the field provides reflection on the author's experience of co-authoring a peer-reviewed manuscript with community partners for publication in an academic journal. The report reflects on the existential, logistical, and process-related challenges of applying community-based research and delivering its promise of knowledge co-creation while grappling with inequities imbedded in the realities of academic and non-academic life. Reflecting on the lessons learned, this paper probes into further considerations for the operationalization of ethical principles for equitable collaboration in community-based research.

KEYWORDS community-academic partnership; co-authorship; engaged scholarship; knowledge co-creation

Community-based research (CBR) has been known to enhance research validity and increase meaningful democratization of knowledge creation. In CBR, knowledge creation is considered a public good that should support and enrich communal life rather than benefit individual academics and private interests (Sandwick et al., 2018). Yet there is dearth of knowledge regarding operationalization of research co-creation principles and ethical practices concerning partnered knowledge mobilization (Castleden et al., 2010; Su et al., 2018). The process of implementing community-based participatory research and the subsequent work on mobilizing co-created knowledge provided rich ground for reflecting not only on the power differentials between university and community-based researchers, but also among community-based researchers as the systemic inequities occurring at institutional levels are easily reproducible in participatory processes of smaller scales (Sandwick et al., 2018). I offer here a reflection on the experience of co-authoring a peer-reviewed manuscript with community collaborators interrogating the existential, logistical, and process-related challenges of applying CBR and delivering its promise of co-creation.

The co-authored peer-reviewed publication titled “‘Participation – with what money and whose time?’ – an intersectional feminist analysis of community participation’ is informed by the doctoral dissertation research *Common Health*, a participatory action research and institutional ethnography project examining the role of non-profit organizations in supporting

grassroots action for health equity and justice. The co-authored publication focuses on the experiences of resident participation in community development projects convened by non-profit and public agencies in a lower/mixed income, racialized neighbourhood in Toronto. It offers a critical analysis of race/class power dynamics in community engagement and provides some signposts for recognizing settler-colonial, white supremacist, and patriarchal capitalist discourses in community engagement. The paper proposes community generated characteristics for instrumental versus transformative community engagement in the form of Community Engagement Continuum.

Inviting community partners as co-authors was my attempt at enhancing community participation in research and knowledge mobilization. However, this was my *first* attempt at writing in co-authorship with community partners and I do not position myself as an expert on co-authorship. I humbly share my experience with the process, its limitations, lessons learned, and aspirations for the future.

Why Co-authorship is Important

“Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged.”

– Audre Lorde

We are a group of four co-authors. Julia Fursova was the lead researcher of the dissertation project that informed the manuscript. Kisa Hamilton, Gillian Kranias and Denise Bishop-Earle were research participants, as well as members of the research advisory team, a governing body for the research project. Kisa and Denise are also residents, activists, and frontline workers in the neighbourhood where the research took place, while Gillian and Julia have experience as outside professionals facilitating community development work in the neighbourhood.

In the co-authored publication we introduce ourselves as “a group of long-time community development collaborators with diverse experiences of privilege and oppression” (Fursova et al., 2022) acknowledging the differences in our race, class, and immigration history as well as other differences related to our identities while respecting our rights to confidentiality. The history of our collaboration goes back to our years of community development work in Toronto neighbourhood improvement areas, formerly known as ‘priority neighbourhoods’ (City of Toronto, 2015). All of us identify as community-based researchers, and our diverse expertise includes adult/popular education, Afrocentric and Indigenous history, trauma-informed practice, health promotion, community engagement, evaluative learning, and participatory action research. We approach knowledge creation as a common good intended to enrich public life and advance civic discourse and democratic participation. We came to this work from different social locations and professional standpoints, bringing in diverse lived experiences. Our commitment to drawing on multiple expertise and identities results in enhanced thinking, greater relevancy of data and analysis, and a greater potential for transformative change (Sandwick et al., 2018).

Co-creation of knowledge mobilization (KMb) products with non-academic partners is an important component in regenerative CBR practice. In CBR a researcher and community partners become critical friends to each other on the collaborative research journey (Su et al., 2018). Such critical friendship prompts knowledge creators to reflect on their positionalities, differences in power and access to resources, and how these shape our roles and input in knowledge production: “Acting as critical friends requires us to call out/call in others with care and respect, paying attention to how larger forces have shaped difficult decisions” (Su et al., 2018, p.16). The co-authored manuscript stemmed from such critical friendship.

Our collective aspirations as a group of community-based researchers and practitioners draw on the well-known action-reflection-action spiral model (Freire, 2000) to support a regenerative research praxis where research is informed by practice to generate evidence grounded in lived experience to further inform and advance practice (see Figure 1). Such regenerative praxis challenges the extractive research process still dominant in academia that often exclusively benefits researchers/academics resulting in little or no benefits to communities involved and may cause harm, especially for equity-deserving and Indigenous communities (Castleden, et al., 2010).

The resulting co-authorship process itself became part of our evidence-informed practice where the main goal and the challenge have been to avoid the reproduction of precisely those abusive dynamics that we critiqued in the manuscript while facilitating the engagement of co-authors. Below are my reflections on this imperfect process with the goal of learning from it and doing it better next time.

Our Co-writing Journey and Review Process

It took us over a year to write the manuscript and see it to the publication stage. The writing began in spring of 2021, at the end of the first year of COVID-19 pandemic, while each of us was dealing with an added burden of caring responsibilities and economic uncertainties that were greatly heightened during the pandemic. Those uncertainties were unique to each individual and household, yet they followed the same pattern of intensified extraction of caring labour and increased risks for gendered, racialized, and otherwise ‘othered’ bodies involved in the provision of care and human services.

At the start of the process, I did not have a structured, well-thought-out approach to the very first draft of the manuscript to fully ground its development in the idea/lof co-authorship. I was preparing a manuscript for a special issue of an academic journal rushing to meet a deadline. This was an example of ‘pandemic writing’

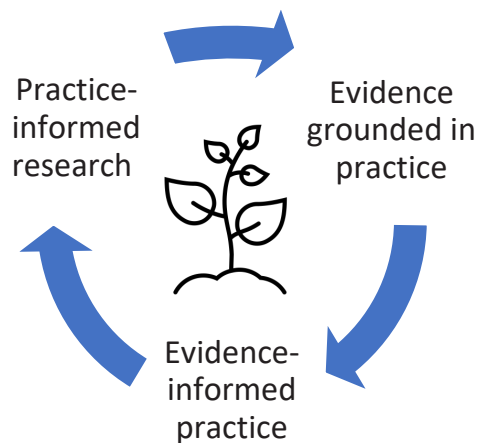


Figure 1. Reflection-Action Cycle in Regenerative Research Praxis

as I was balancing numerous responsibilities, while transitioning to a full-time, university-based job. Such pressures contributed to a blurred focus of the very first draft, which was identified as a critical flaw in the first round of review with community partners. The next version of the manuscript had a different title and a sharpened focus. I clarified that the manuscript would be developed in co-authorship and I formally invited my community partners as co-authors. At the same time, we also decided as a group of professionals to come together as a non-profit worker co-op. The co-authored manuscript was one of our first collaborative projects as co-founding members of the Transform Practice co-op. I identified as the lead author and clarified that I would do the heavy lifting of the re/writing, inviting co-authors to contribute to the draft, in particular to those sections that described the local context and presented the findings. Coming together formally as a co-op supported a more structured and intentional approach to co-authorship as the manuscript review became one of the agenda items during our co-op planning meetings.

Most of the input to the manuscript was provided online to a shared file on OneDrive. I incorporated co-author input into the text using the 'track changes' function and reported afterwards on how I integrated the suggestions. In addition to online collaboration, we also had two in-person review sessions: one before the first submission and one after the peer review before the final submission of the revised manuscript.

One of the co-authors preferred to work with a paper copy of the manuscript, so in response to this preference I printed the hard copy to share and then followed up with a phone call. During our first in-person review session we focused on testing the practical application of Community Engagement Continuum and refined its language for accuracy and accessibility. After that we continued collaborating online.

The draft for submission was finalized by the end of fall 2021 and submitted to the journal in late December. We received the results of the peer review in May 2022, only minor changes were recommended and both reviewers commented on the high quality of our analysis and presentation of findings. As the leading author, I took on the responsibility to make the changes and write the response to reviewers. We reviewed the edited manuscript together during in-person meeting and made some refinements to the text including wordsmithing sentences for greater clarity and minimizing the use of academic jargon. The revised draft was submitted to the journal in early June 2022 and accepted for the publication in mid-August.

Challenges: Co-authorship as a Balancing Act

The greatest challenge of the co-authorship process was balancing our intense schedules, which included full time jobs and caring responsibilities as well as the start-up of the co-op. The fact that at the time of the manuscript writing I was not holding an academic position, served as an equalizer of sorts as we were all involved in doing this work in an unpaid capacity. The downside of this was that I had no budget to adequately and equitably resource community co-authors' participation. In terms of the benefits distribution, we anticipated that the publication would raise the co-op's profile. However, one could say that for myself, as an aspiring academic and the leading author, the publication could yield more benefits in terms of increasing the

likelihood of an academic job, promotion, and tenure. We also had to accommodate and adapt to varying degrees of comfort with and access to technology, e.g., Microsoft Office suite, One Drive, and file sharing. This required continuous sharing of skills and technical troubleshooting. We also continuously negotiated the language of the manuscript focusing on accessibility and minimization of academic jargon. I am especially grateful to the co-authors for this as sometimes I can get particularly attached to certain academic concepts or terminology that preclude accessibility. Highlighting the diversity and intersectionality of our privileged and marginalized identities while respecting the individual right to confidentiality was another balancing act and an important aspect in identifying us as a group of co-authors while affirming our commitment to co-creation.

The Value of Co-Authorship

The co-authorship process resulted in multiple benefits for the quality of data analysis and presentation, as well as for the relationships and level of trust among us as a group of collaborators. The conversations that took place during the review, the iterative process of re/writing, and collaborative meaning-making greatly enhanced rigor and validity of findings, interpretation, and presentation. In CBR practice research and action are rarely a linear progression, the co-authorship deepened the entangled and synergetic aspects of CBR as praxis (Sandwick et al., 2018).

The co-authorship became an integral part of the research and knowledge co-creation methodology. The review and input from community partners, who were residents, activists, and frontline workers in the neighbourhood added depth and accuracy to the sections of the manuscript that describe the local context and its implication in broader global dynamics of extraction and dispossession. Community Engagement Continuum co-creation enabled more precise description of the characteristics of extractive/instrumental versus transformative community engagement process. Co-authorship generated an enhanced attention to the accessibility of the language and resulted in the minimized use of academic jargon, as community partners were reading each iteration of the draft with a practitioner's eye. All together it led to a publication that we hope has a greater relevance and accessibility to practitioners and thus a greater impact.

Considerations and Aspirations for the Future

“Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.”

– Maya Angelou

This experience of co-authorship with community partners provided important lessons that informed the following process-related aspirations and resource-related considerations.

Process-related aspirations

Establish clear criteria for co-authorship and acknowledgement depending on the level of community partner involvement from the early stages of research project planning (Castleden, et al., 2010). To gauge the level of interest, potential involvement of community partners, and the supports required, generate a menu of KMb products. In the process of co-authorship be transparent and accountable at every step. Explain how you integrated feedback and input, clarify the moments when you were not able to do so, or made some content related decisions that differed from community partners' expectations. Keep your co-authors informed about the stages of the submission process.

While it is important to use the advantages of online collaboration, do not underestimate the value of in-person meetings. Sitting in a circle and sharing food makes the co-writing and review process less dry, more personal, and adds to the synergy and engagement so that the final product becomes something more than the sum of its parts. Last, but not least, celebrate your collective progress, take a stock of your learning, and support and nourish each other every step of the way.

Logistical and resource-related considerations

To make the process goals a reality, there are some important logistical and resource-related aspects of co-authorship to consider. Identify and agree on an effective and accessible file sharing system that allows for tracking changes. Discuss accessibility aspect with partners as not everyone may have a paid subscription for the online suite of Microsoft Office. Collectively decide on a manageable review schedule, while being realistic in your assessment of the time/effort the review may require. Ask your community co-authors how many days/weeks they need to provide their input. Be guided by internal deadlines that make sense for your co-authors and the integrity of your process rather than external deadlines. When external deadlines take priority, consider publishing solo, or with other academic partners, while acknowledging community input but without pursuing co-authorship with community partners. For those in formal academic positions and/or applying for research grants (e.g., SSHRC Connection, PEG, PDG, PG programs) that call for greater engagement with community partners, request funding to support community partners' participation in the co-creation of KMb products, including but not limited to peer-reviewed publications. Bear in mind that any kind of meaningful collaboration takes time and usually contributes to a longer timeline for project implementation schedules. As such be realistic in your assessments, allowing sufficient time for partner participation.¹

Most importantly, never expect unpaid labor from your community partners. Think of your community partners as consultants whose expertise is essential and reward their time and input accordingly. Budget funds for salaries, honoraria payment, travel, including local travel such as public transit and mileage, meals at meetings, and, where appropriate, child- and eldercare. Budget for software to make sure everyone has access to a platform for file sharing,

¹ The formula I use for time assessment is: 'how long I think it would take' x 3 = 'how long it will actually take'.

and consider also budgeting for tech support to troubleshoot online collaboration problems. Accommodate the provision of hard copies of the drafts and ‘pen and paper’ reviews, as these afford deeper engagement with the text and greater attention to nuances that otherwise may escape authors’ attention.

Conclusions

These reflections on the limitations, successes, and lessons learned during co-authorship with community partners add to critical conversations concerning good practices and accountability that enhance meaningful democratization of knowledge production (Su et al., 2018). The lessons learned reiterate the importance of early, open, and transparent communication between community partners and researchers, the value of co-authorship for relationship-building, trust, and deepened collaboration. As CBR practice is highly context-specific, there is no “one size fits all” approach, and it is absolutely necessary to maintain ongoing and reflective conversations among practitioners about wise practices, ethical considerations, and solutions for ongoing challenges.

About the Author

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