

## Community Learning and Mobilization Through Research

Joe Curnow

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education- U of T

### *Introduction*

The Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) launched a funded stream for Community University Research Alliance grants (CURAs) in 1999. The purpose of the program is:

“To support the creation of alliances between community organizations and postsecondary institutions which, through a process of ongoing collaboration and mutual learning, will foster comparative research, training and the creation of new knowledge in areas of shared importance for the social, cultural or economic development of communities” (SSHRC, 2011).

CURA grants’ objectives include developing equal partnership between community organizations and researchers, and reinforcing community capacity while strengthening the work of community groups. Learning is a central, if not explicit, goal of the grant-- the hope being that universities will create and mobilize new knowledge, and that communities will have a say in what is being researched and be actively involved in knowledge production.

My interest is in examining the extent to which CURAs are an effective environment for community learning and mobilization. In this study, I interrogate community researcher learning -- the what and how of learning in community-based research funded by SSHRC.

The purpose of this research is to strengthen community development through partnerships and to improve community based research processes, empowering community researchers/activists through community-based research. This research seeks to understand how community researchers learn through participatory research and if it facilitates a greater commitment to community development work.

*Case Study*

The project examines the survey component of a five-year funded alliance between three universities and eight local community organizations in Toronto. Examining grassroots popular education and learning strategies in a sample of the highest poverty neighbourhoods, researchers are conducting a survey administered by community researchers and coordinated by university staff. The survey asks participants about their assessments of their geographic communities, their involvement in community activity or campaigns, and what they have learned through their involvement. For the purposes of this study, I examine the role of the community researchers who collect survey data through interviews with people in their communities.

*Recruitment*

Participants were selected based on their status as community researchers who have completed the survey process for the CURA research project. Participants were recruited from two sites of survey collection. All are active volunteers or staff within the community organizations and represent the racial and economic diversity of their neighbourhoods.. Two focus groups representing different neighbourhoods were conducted. The first focus group included two participants from the local community organization. The second included six participants from the community organization and two university-affiliated participants.

*Things That Were Learned*

Community researchers immersed in survey collection learned through formal and informal means and in multiple environments. They acknowledged the value of the knowledge they already had about their neighbourhood, gained research skills, learned how to improve their

community organizations, developed grievances based on the survey interviews, and constructed an initial analysis of the causes and potential solutions to some of those grievances.

### *Recognizing Their Own Knowledge*

Notably, what was relearned or acknowledged was the amount of information and knowledge community researchers already had. They said that they didn't really learn new things from the process, but it helped them to know what they already knew. When asked if they had learned of any new resources that people access in their neighbourhood, one researcher said, "No. We already knew! I learned about the issues and needs of the people, but not about any new things." Repeatedly, community researchers said things like "Yeah, I knew it from living here." The process helped them to bring together what they knew from their experiences and to situate those experiences within a larger understanding of their communities. This recognition of the local knowledge also motivated some community researchers to do something about the problems they perceived in their communities. When asked about how the research had affected her, a community researcher said, "It didn't change what I really knew. It just made me more, ok things need to get done. More like, Ok, Action, that's what I'm about."

### *Research Skills*

One significant thing community researchers learned was how to do research. This is the area where learning was most evident. Community researchers gained interviewing and research administration skills that informed their practice.

The interview skills community researchers gained happened through formal learning in a training setting, where faculty and graduate students facilitated lectures and practice sessions for community researchers. The more important environment was through the experience of interviewing. From the experience, community researchers developed strategies for improving

their interviews. Community researchers were quite reflexive in their learning, and with each survey they conducted, they refined their practice and informed each other's practice.

Community researchers also developed their own language for talking about the survey and why it was important, rejecting the framing the university provided. Several said things like, "I think you should not go with this 'anti-poverty' thing. People don't understand this, so go something like house issue, home issue, employment issue, then they'll understand you." They developed strong critiques of the survey and in some instances supplanted the sections that did not work for them with different explanations or descriptions that they felt were more appropriate to their community and suggesting changes. This included reframing the questions in the survey to be less repetitive, developing the survey with more resident input, incentivizing participation, and employing someone from the community to serve as the liaison between the community organization and the university. These suggestions represent significant learning about how one conducts research and may enable the community researchers and university researchers to become better researchers in the future.

### *Grievance Construction*

The community researchers involved all conducted surveys in their neighbourhoods. Through these interviews, they learned about the specific problems that the survey probed, focusing on housing, food security/nutrition, safety, education and health. From this process, community researchers gained an intimate understanding of the problems of their communities. This was a process of "learning about the problems of the people," as one researcher said, as they interviewed and learned from their neighbours. This process enabled community researchers to construct grievances, as they became experts on what was going on in their neighbourhoods. In each neighbourhood the responses were different, but reflected the specific concerns of the

community members. The areas researchers commented on included youth issues (including gangs, lack of activities, and youth as targets of police), housing issues (including affordability, low-quality, security, and poor management), unemployment (especially for newcomers), immigration (including deportation and credential problems), transit, daycare, isolation, over-population, the economic mix of a neighbourhood (such as gentrification), gender roles and culture, and others. One community researcher said, “I learned a lot of the issues. I was thinking, I am living in this area I surveyed last year also, but this survey was different from last year.”

### *Systemic Analysis*

In some cases, researchers were able to identify patterns in responses and move beyond the basic iteration of grievances. They began to develop an analysis of the causes of problems and think systemically about the broader phenomena. Interestingly, out of the more than 15 grievances named, community researchers only began to dig deeper on three.

From the grievance of unemployment, both groups of community researchers identified the lack of local hiring as a central impediment to people from the community gaining employment. One researcher said,

“Another thing is that here we have a big mall, lots of stores, but the people who are working here, most of them are coming from the other communities. Why they are not giving us – we have qualifications, we are hard workers... like, most of my participants they said, “Why they are not giving us chance to work here first?””

Many other researchers shared this assessment. They looked at the mall, the stores, the local factories, and identified that the companies hired from outside the community and could have provided a significant numbers of jobs to people within the neighbourhood. They did not understand why this was happening, but questioned the bigger picture. They understood that it was endemic to the area and that this could be a key improvement if they could change the hiring practices.

Also related to unemployment, one group of community researchers interrogated the problem of recognizing credentials for well-educated newcomers to Canada. They not only understood that unemployment was a problem in their neighbourhood, but also understood the reasons so many newcomers could not get good jobs. In some cases, the analysis was coming directly from the community members who were interviewed, and with other researchers the analysis came from hearing multiple stories and fitting the pieces together themselves.

Community researchers felt obligated to act on what they perceived to be a systemic injustice, saying,

“ I want to write to people, the Canadians who work in embassies back in my country, and ask why are they encouraging people to come here, when we say “This is the qualification we have, this is the type of professionals we are,” why are they encouraging and saying this is available, and when we come here we're left alone? Because that's what happened to ALL these people here! And ask them why? It's not that people are desperate to come here, they want to come here because Canada is a better place, but they *are* professionals in their field. Once they come here and they say “No, we are not recognizing you, I don't recognize this'.” It doesn't make any kind of sense.”

Community researchers also identified patterns in the low quality of affordable housing, where one building management company was not meeting its obligations to tenants in numerous buildings within the neighbourhood. Because researchers were interviewing multiple people, they were able to see the bigger picture in a way that individual respondents could not. Below is an example of the way the community researchers identified broader problems in the social housing in the neighbourhood:

**Robin:** One of my respondents, she was living in Flemingdon, I think she was living in 'housing,' one of the problems she mentioned was security, security is not safe. Because if they lock their stuff in the downstairs, then they break the lock and remove everything. Her main concern was this, that it's not safe.

**Linda:** It's the same thing in Thorncliffe. We have a problem in 26, 27 and 50 – it's the landlord, you wrote the letter, or you have a problem in the apartment, he only just wrote the letter to say you have to pay the rent, and that's it. So that problem is, because I live in

27, and we have the same problem – they broke the locks, and they steal all the things. So I think yeah, we have that problem in 27, 26...

**Keith:** I think the administration is the same for these buildings. Transglobe. I haven't seen such unprofessional people in my life. Whatever – you abuse them, you scold them, there is no result.

**Jenny:** Wait, you live in one of those buildings? Ah, you live in 26...

The conversation continued, as community researchers began to discuss the ways they could hold the management company accountable for the poor conditions in their buildings. This was among the most concrete examples of community researchers translating their community surveys into an analysis and strategizing around collective actions they could take.

These examples demonstrate an initial interrogation of the grievances that community researchers were introduced to through the surveys and their lived experiences in the community. I would argue that their understandings of the issues, while sophisticated in some respects, are still in the formative stages, and with more time, reflection, and investigation, they would deepen their analysis and identify root causes and potential interventions.

### ***Discussion***

While researchers learned through their experiences of conducting research, there were some things that struck me as significant that were missing from their reflections.

#### *Community Organizing Skills*

One of the surprising findings was that community researchers felt disempowered by the process. They reflected that they had learned/relearned about all the problems in their communities and they felt like there was nothing they could do about all the grievances they were constructing. When asked what they would do with the information they learned, one respondent said, “What do you mean? Like we have to take action or something? If we had

power we could say anything. We don't have power." Another said, "Mostly the problem is employment, so we can't do anything about it, you know. We can't hire them, because we don't have jobs for ourselves." The process of survey collection left community researchers feeling "powerless" and without a clear means of acting on their problems. Where some participatory research clearly focuses on collective action, this case leaves community researchers in a gap between information and activation. Most troubling was the statement by a community researcher about her feelings: "It's not powerless, like we take our issues, like for example our meeting today. You people (the university) know about our issues, we, hopefully, like you said you will be talking about these things in the future, so we feel a little bit powerful, because we brought those issues to you." She abdicated her power to the university, and rather than feel obligated (personally or as a community researcher) to fight to change her community, she sees the university affiliates as responsible for taking the information and creating whatever changes they see fit.

This CURA survey process serves as an environment for learning, but is incomplete. Through research training and practice in interviewing, community researchers built capacity for further research and knowledge mobilization. From the surveys they conducted, community researchers understood the problems in their neighbourhoods and developed grievances. From some of these grievances, community researchers began to develop a structural analysis of the problems they faced. Finally, they recognized and validated all the information they already knew about their community. Notably, they did not gain organizing skills through their community research. In all, the survey collection process was ripe with opportunities for learning, and yet without a participatory analysis process and opportunities to take action, it fell short of its potential to catalyze collective learning for social change.