

Collaborative Engagement from within the Academy: A Self-Reflexive Narrative

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Abstract

This essay builds upon the current movement around publicly engaged scholarship, seeking to illuminate its challenges, risks, and rewards through a self-reflexive narrative. The author, as a community engaged scholar midway to tenure within the academy, attempts to situate herself within this larger milieu, uncover the assumptions under which she has operated, explore the impact of the publicly engaged work she has done, and clarify the impact she hopes this work has. The narrative extends recent discussions within the field, narrowing a gap in the service-learning and community engagement scholarship by drawing attention to the impact of collaborative engagement on academic-practitioners. The essay seeks to both increase the intentionality, courage, and humility with which engaged scholars enter and exit the space of others, and encourage the self-care and self-awareness needed for the long haul.

Keywords: self-reflexivity, public scholarship, service-learning, community engagement, higher education, wicked problems, tenure and promotion

What am I doing?

“*Never* show that to anyone.”

Why am I doing this?

“It makes *no* sense.”

Who am I?

“The inner workings of your mind are *scary*.”

Who do I seek to be?

“You have *no* expertise.”

Midway to tenure within the academy, I offer this reflection as an attempt to lay bare *my own* answers to the above questions, in an effort to situate myself, uncover the assumptions under which I have been operating, explore the impact of the publicly engaged work I have done, and clarify the impact I hope to have. While listening to the voices of diverse others is critical to collaborative engagement, so too is situating oneself in one’s own words. Though admittedly my objectives here are largely self-serving, I hope this narrative helps to ground other engaged scholars, increasing the intentionality, courage, and humility with which they enter and exit the space of others, and encouraging the self-care and self-awareness they need for the long haul.

This narrative is indeed timely. The need for more self-reflexivity from community-engaged scholars was, in fact, a prominent theme that emerged from the 2017 International Association of Research on Service Learning and Community Engagement conference. Specifically, the event’s keynote speakers and individual conference sessions emphasized the importance of devoting more attention to how engagement is transformative not simply for students, the community, and institution, but also for academic-practitioners. This narrative seeks to make plain some of the challenges and risks involved in such a focal shift, as well as the rewards; by doing so, I add my voice to those of others in the movement around publicly engaged scholarship (Post, Ward, Longo, & Saltmarsh, 2016).

What Is My Positionality?

I have a PhD in philosophy and currently hold a tenure-track faculty position at a large, public, liberal arts university comprising primarily White

faculty, staff, and students. In my position, I have been given the opportunity to make a living through enacting (and thereby putting to the test) many of my most deeply cherished values and core commitments.¹ I am a feminist pragmatist philosopher committed to collaborative engaged learning, which is an experiential and relational approach to philosophy grounded in social challenges—and which is relatively uncommon within the academy (Lake, 2015; Lake, Fernando, & Eardley, 2016).

As a member of a department that values developing students' awareness of themselves, others, and their surrounding community, as well as collaborative engagement around complex challenges, I have been given the opportunity to design curricula, pursue scholarship, and explore service opportunities that open spaces for enacting and testing my own commitments. I am also embedded within a college within the university committed to empowering students, engaging in creative and collaborative inquiry, and fostering diverse community partnerships (a college that even values “risk-taking” and alternative venues for scholarship and teaching)—all values I hold and seek to explore through my position. On the surface then, I am in a place designed to nurture collaborative public engagement.

In addition to the unique privilege of working in a space that opens opportunities for pursuing my deepest commitments, I hold a host of privileges that extend beyond this university setting: I am a White, straight, married, currently able-bodied, and not yet elderly woman holding U.S. citizenship. I am surrounded by a social network cultivated since childhood. I have not yet even confronted the challenges of aging parents or rebellious teenagers.

I am also a first-generation college student; indeed, the very first within my own social network to step foot on a college campus at all. Prior to entering college, I had no friends with experience in this world, no mentors, no notion of the culture and ethos of a university. I was unsure of how to navigate such a space, and this lack of social connection and cultural awareness persisted throughout my undergraduate and graduate work. Indeed, despite a decade of teaching in higher

¹ I have memories from childhood of being deeply troubled by the “gaps between”—between social groups, institutions, facts and values, beliefs and actions, science and faith, etc.—and by how such gaps allow injustice to fester and suffering to deepen. Looking back, I can trace those vague concerns to an undergraduate career focused on “the examined life,” masters-level work that centered on uncovering individual and institutional rationales for lagging social policies and practices, and PhD work devoted to searching for better approaches to closing those gaps and alleviating such suffering.

education (as a visitor, affiliate, and tenure-track faculty member), I still often feel unaware of, hesitant about, or concerned by some of the norms associated with faculty life in higher education. In floating between worlds that do not understand one another, I often feel a deep sense of isolation and an attendant desire to build a community between. This positionality has added to my challenges of cultivating a sustained social network.

I explicate my social identity in this narrative precisely because it impacts my knowledge of place, my understanding of philosophy and the academy, and my pedagogical approach; it has created spaces of affirmation and opportunity, and of suspicion and misunderstanding; it has offered me time to complete an array of work projects while simultaneously characterizing that invested time as a waste; and it often lends a façade of legitimacy and authority I do not feel I necessarily possess.

I have found my efforts toward collaborative engagement²—efforts to move outside and between various circles—to be incredibly challenging and rewarding, often serving simultaneously as sources of pain and rich learning. It has also been comforting and disturbing to uncover that many others have had similar experiences (Goerisch, 2017; Post et al., 2016; Rushmer & Shucksmith, 2016; Tilley-Lubbs, 2009). Their narratives have been integral in helping me to better situate my own work and thereby to navigate the practical and ethical tensions and challenges inherent to collaborative engagement work with students, community, and staff.³

Situating myself in this way can, I hope, help me to be more intentional about how I “bear witness” to the stories of others (Dunn, 2014). It acknowledges that the personal, social, and political are inherently interwoven in efforts toward collaborative engagement, allowing me to reflect upon and analyze those efforts. My goal is to explore the questions and interpretations that emerge from such self-

² Aligning myself with the next-generation engagement movement, I define *collaborative engagement* as an iterative and emergent process that seeks authentic and reciprocal partnerships between those working from within institutions of higher education and the community (Hartley & Saltmarsh 2016).

³ With their stories in mind, I begin this narrative by explicating this positionality, noting both the privileges I bear and the precariousness of being-between. I begin here because my teaching, research, and service commitments emerge from how I am situated within the academy and the larger society.

reflexivity, uncover moments of connection across complex webs of difference, and articulate new ways of engaging in these worlds.

In this uncovering, I pose and grapple with the following questions:

- What are the assumptions under which I operate?
- What should I “do” with my privileges and within my place?
- What is the impact I am seeking? How can I come to know the true impact of my work on others?
- What ultimately are the opportunities for my future growth as a teacher and scholar committed to collaborative engagement?

What Are My assumptions?

Tracing my educational journey—from my first steps onto a college campus, to my graduate work in American philosophy, my dissertation on wicked problems, and my subsequent teaching, scholarship, and service—has highlighted my sustained commitment to lifelong, collaborative, and experiential learning (Lake, 2017). Such a commitment necessitates the ability to listen deeply and, at the same time, advocate humbly. Through this, I have uncovered five core, guiding assumptions:

1. Too often, “good” people do “nothing”: Many social problems (and the suffering that results) continue and worsen because of isolation, ignorance, fear, cynicism, and apathy (both individual and institutional). I aspire and seek to foster a cautious but tenacious hope.
2. There is no out: Technological innovation and expert intervention cannot “save us.” Generating and sustaining inclusive, responsive, and genuinely ameliorative change often requires that individuals and groups work across seemingly intractable divides and within unjust institutions. Everyone is “in it.”
3. There are always opportunity costs: Acting/intervening and not acting/doing nothing both yield consequences. Given this, collaborative, experiential, project- and place-based learning will better prepare students for lives of active citizenship in this world than will theory-driven, class-bound practices.

4. Sustained and inclusive change takes time: Dialogue-across-difference and scaffolded curricula throughout a program of study are more likely to yield opportunities, actions, and/or projects that address shared problems.
5. Transformative education engages whole selves: Education should teach to whole selves—that is, intellectual, emotional, and social beings. I deeply desire to teach in a way that honors and encourages whole selves, while I simultaneously desire to be “whole” myself.⁴

Thus, I assume it is possible and worthwhile to create situations and scenarios in which deep listening and experiential, collaborative learning occur. I assume that such practices can yield both tangible and intangible goods for all those engaged. Yet, what if the consequences of such engagement yield the opposite? What if such spaces and practices end up reinforcing inequity instead of redressing it? Within unequal power dynamics and under limited timeframes and unjust structures, bringing students and community together is risky, and poses a host of challenges to all involved.⁵

Working within the community on real, complex, high-stakes issues carries the very serious risk of reinforcing oppression. At the same time, I worry that academics easily dismiss the dangers of refusing to engage. In an inevitably interdependent world, there is no “outside”; thus, academics are always complicit in some way. According to the editors of *Publicly Engaged Scholars*, such engagement requires “scholars [to] act on their values through collaboration, inclusiveness, participation, task sharing, and reciprocity in public problem solving” (Post et al., 2016, p. 4). It also requires “an authentic respect for the expertise and experience that everyone contributes to education, knowledge

⁴ The idea of wholeness emerges in the work of experiential educator David Kolb (2003), who argued that higher education needs to develop the “whole person,” encouraging “creativity, wisdom, and integrity” (p.162). As an instructor, I strive to move students from being passive knowledge consumers to being collaborative, courageous, and compassionate knowledge producers and users. As a public scholar, I want to encourage other educators to consider the merits of such an approach.

⁵ For example, real world challenges and uneven power dynamics can overwhelm and silence students, limiting their autonomy. Conversely, students and faculty can reinforce oppressive stereotypes, waste community resources, and damage partner or university reputations. Faculty risk exposing themselves to censure from academic peers and administrators who do not support such work. In addition, collaborative engagement endeavors can increase student anxiety and stress, increasing the chances of negative course evaluations.

generation and community building” (p. 4). Engaging in this work over the past five years has consistently taught me the serious limitations of disciplinary expertise and the need for a more inclusive and holistic place-based approach.⁶

Collaborative engagement has also led me to believe that working across difference provides a vantage that an individual can rarely achieve in isolation, that it can—and often does—increase awareness and responsiveness, foster habits of courageous and creative co-action, and catalyze more inclusive and effective change. It also demands reflexivity about the agendas on the table and an awareness of the power dynamics in the room—neither of which are a part of standard doctoral training in most fields.

Nevertheless, situating one’s self in this way and uncovering the assumptions under which one’s work emerges opens opportunities for exploring what one has done and why; it also allows an individual to explore what he or she *should* do.

What Have I Done and What Should I Do?

Given my commitment to collaborative, action-oriented learning processes, my privileges, and my position within higher education, I have pursued teaching, research, and service opportunities that yield spaces and mechanisms for collaborative engagement, foster relationships across divides, encourage open-minded advocacy, and instill what Svanström, Lozano-García, and Rowe (2008) called “change-agent” skills (i.e., the motivation and capacity to step into and alleviate systemic and interconnected social problems). In designing and teaching curricula that require collaboration, integration, and problem-solving, I have also tried to hold myself accountable to practicing these skills—to collaborating across boundaries and advocating for change within the current structures of higher education.

Is This What I Should Be Doing?

Working within a dominant institution (i.e., a university) provides me with consistent possibilities for influencing the status quo so that it becomes more inclusive, participatory, and equitable for students, staff, and the surrounding community. For instance, I have the power to design, implement, and assess new

⁶ In “‘To Serve a Larger Purpose,’” Saltmarsh and Hartley (2011) asked faculty to do just this: explore their own assumptions and decide whether they are committed to co-creation or authoritarian expertise.

curricula, engage in scholarship, sit on committees that shape university, college, and departmental policies, consult with the community, and present my work nationally and internationally. Even so, what has this yielded?

When asking myself this question, my mind immediately turns to the relationships that have emerged and the concrete, “on the ground” transformations my collaborative endeavors have generated.⁷ I think about the results of this work, including:

- the genuine connections I have with many alumni and community partners as well as the relationships they share with each other;
- the burgeoning networks of support alumni and community partners have formed with and for one another;
- the experiential farm-to-table course that students imagined and then helped to implement at a local middle school;
- the creation of the “5 x 5”—recently renamed “[The Laker Effect Challenge](#)”—a competition designed to recognize, resource, and reward collaborative, community-engaged ideas and projects across campus;
- the moment the [Heartside Gleaning Initiative](#)⁸—one of my long-term community partners—won the 5 x 5. Creating the 5 x 5, connecting this burgeoning nonprofit to the competition, and then watching the organization share its story, accumulate community support, and ultimately win well-deserved money—allowing it to cease functioning out of car trunks—was a powerful, transformative moment of affirmation;

⁷ Relationships are consistently identified as essential elements to collaborative engagement across the fields of service-learning and community engagement, along with efforts to address inequity and injustice (Hart, 2006; Kinloch, 2016; Patterson, Kinloch, & Nemeth, 2017).

⁸ The Heartside Gleaning Initiative supplies fresh, healthy produce collected from farmers’ donations at farmers’ markets to community meal programs, food pantries, and low-income residents. The goal of the initiative is to improve the health and quality of life for Grand Rapids residents by not only increasing access to locally grown food, but also awareness. In 2014, Heartside’s first season of operation—when staff performed their work out of the trunks of their cars—more than 17,000 pounds of fresh produce were gleaned and redistributed (Heartside Gleaning Initiative, 2014). The \$5,000 prize the nonprofit ultimately won through its involvement in the 5 x 5 provided critical seed money for storing and transporting produce.

- the ways in which students' on-campus partnership around food justice and their advocacy for the student food pantry transformed the pantry's outreach to the wider student body, resulting in the establishment of new policies and procedures ensuring that all incoming freshman are aware of the resources available on campus. I reflect upon the drastic rise in students accessing the pantry, and I hope this work has increased food security for our students;
- how a local movement toward food justice led two community facilitators to Google-search issues relevant to these concerns in Grand Rapids, ultimately discovering and finding relevance in one of my scholarly articles on these issues, and then to ask me if I would consult with them. I take heart in the work I did to pursue open-access grant funding for the publication of this article.

Yet, within the structures of the academy, such moments often count for little, since in many cases they do not fit into the review process, and none really signal tangible progress toward tenure. Procedures for capturing and reporting faculty activity offer little space for sharing such narratives.

Indeed, there are few, if any, mechanisms for capturing some of the more immediate and substantial impacts of my efforts to move toward collaborative engagement within the current system (let alone channels for ascertaining the potential for long-term impact). Determinations of merit for scholars and educators center primarily on end-of-semester student evaluations, faculty-to-faculty reviews, and disciplinary-specific scholarship output.

Nevertheless, over the past three years, my commitments have led me to seek and—when I have not found them—create spaces and opportunities for more equitable and inclusive collaborations, spaces intended to foster dialogic encounters across differences and opportunities that might catalyze transformation. This includes encounters across disciplines and departments, and between and among faculty, staff, administrators, and students, but also in the community and across institutions. These opportunities for engagement have expanded my own frameworks and, according to student and community feedback, offered a space for them to do the same (Lake et al., 2016; Lake, Ricco, & Whipps, 2018; Lake, Sisson, & Fauvel, 2017). Given the demographics of the campus community and the results of the university's 2016 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), I find the

potential for expanding my own and students' frameworks to be incredibly important.⁹ For instance, opportunities to engage with regional nonprofit organizations, public schools, and community members have exposed the idealistic frames through which academic philosophy often misses the mark.

Similarly, the opportunity to be a part of an interdisciplinary research team studying 10 different academic departments across three institutions of higher education, all seeking to foster collaborative and scaffolded engagement, has vastly expanded my understanding of academic and community-based challenges to reciprocal, sustainable, and equitable partnerships. In this role, I have had the opportunity to design, conduct, and analyze surveys and interviews with community partners, faculty, staff, students, and administrators, create reports, present findings, and help shape the next steps of the initiative. I have most valued how such spaces generate the potential for responsive transformation. For instance, in the first semester, faculty surveys revealed that departments were not eliciting feedback from students about their experiences in the programs or their recommendations for curricular revisions. I was able to link these findings back to the research on best practices for effective community-based learning and offer recommendations that led several participating departments to include students on their engagement teams. Similarly, interviews with community partners uncovered that communication between faculty and their partners was inconsistent and that partners were often unaware of or under-informed about the status of projects. Short, responsive briefs on these findings served as effective prompts for encouraging more responsive engagement practices (Lake et al., 2017).

Working within and across divides can reveal ignorance, encourage divergent thinking, shift feelings of cynicism, apathy, or fear, and foster collaborative virtues and habits of engagement. Within a privileged university system operating under inequitable social structures and uneven power dynamics, such work brings with it a host of challenges and risks (Hernandez, 2016). For example, in 2016-2017 I sought to reimagine the traditional faculty learning community as a space far more inclusive of the actual stakeholders involved in collaborative engagement. This meant that the community included participants from across campus, representing diverse positionalities, including students;

⁹ The 2016 NSSE results indicated that first-year students, for instance, were not as involved in the surrounding community as their counterparts nationally. It also showed that the university's students reported experiencing fewer connections to others of diverse backgrounds.

directors and staff of the centers for social justice; adjunct, affiliate, tenure-track, and tenured faculty; administrators; a recent community partner; and boundary-spanning individuals who had moved between different roles within the university. Creating such a space is—under my operating assumptions—essential to understanding more fully the realities each stakeholder must confront. Indeed, it is one of the first recommendations offered by Saltmarsh and Harley (2011), who suggested that practitioners must model democratic engagement by opening and legitimizing spaces of inclusiveness.

Such spaces, however, can easily reinforce, rather than reinvent, uneven structures and inequitable practices; that is, students may end up feeling silenced, staff unheard, community partners trivialized, faculty undervalued, administration co-opted, etc. Ironically, the spaces and opportunities I have sought to create might, in fact, re-enact practices I seek to oppose; they might waste time, energy, and resources that could otherwise have been devoted to others and other causes. By creating collaborative spaces that cross traditional power borders and invite a diverse range of stakeholders, I might end up causing harm to those in vulnerable positions who lack the power to dissent (e.g., students, community partners, adjunct faculty). Indeed, as an untenured faculty member within the current structures of higher education, I also face risks.

The existence of imbalances in power, hidden political agendas, and dominant antidemocratic cultural norms (Darder, 2012) mean that I may never even be aware that the spaces and opportunities I have sought to co-create might actually marginalize, silence, or otherwise oppress members of particular groups. On the other hand, opportunities to more inclusively address inequity are lost when the fear of failure and the assessment of risk overwhelm the courage to try.

While my values and commitments have motivated me to seek philosophical endeavors with students that are more inclusive, place-based, and action-oriented, philosophers are not generally trained to participate in or lead collaborative engagement.¹⁰ From one angle, this may make these practices appear innovative; however, it also makes such work riskier and far more arduous for

¹⁰ This is starting to change, however. With the move toward public engagement, programs, initiatives, and organizations are emerging across the United States, including: the outreach efforts of the Society of Philosophers in America, the Engaged Philosophy Internship Program at Michigan State University, the *Public Philosophy Journal*, the Philosophy Bakes Bread radio show and podcast, and others.

students, for community partners, and for me. In the gap between who I am and who I seek to be, what I know and what I need to know, my drive to learn-by-doing across difference—to collaboratively address high-stakes, shared, social challenges—can cause, rather than alleviate, suffering. This is and will remain my greatest fear and source of pain.

Two questions loom large: (1) How can I foster greater awareness of the ways in which such experiences genuinely impact all participants? (2) What practices have I—and can I—employ to reduce the likelihood that such spaces reinforce oppression? Regarding the first question, I have consistently sought (and continue to seek) avenues for more careful and responsive engagement practices. This work has involved:

- designing and participating in collaborative learning communities;
- pursuing additional interdisciplinary training and social justice education;
- seeking mentors from a wide variety of spaces (i.e., in the community, on campus, across disciplinary fields, and different higher education institutional spaces);
- creating and refining pedagogical tools as well as formative and summative assessment metrics for judging the outcomes of my approach;
- completing cross-disciplinary literature reviews on the ethical challenges of collaborative engagement;
- employing participatory action processes designed to yield inclusive feedback loops; and,
- engaging in national and international workshops and conferences.

Given the limits of time and space, I will discuss just a few of these pursuits in more detail in the following sections.

Collaborative-Activist Learning Communities

In many ways, my commitments have led me to not only focus on deepening my own awareness of my positionality, the perspective of others, and the complexities within the larger system, but also leverage what I have learned into

the potential for change (personal, relational, procedural, institutional, or cultural). For instance, despite the risks and challenges of working across power differentials within the aforementioned collaborative engagement learning community, this group, from across members' various positions, identified barriers and risks to publicly engaged social justice work on campus. We noted the risk of harm to the community and students, a lack of supportive infrastructure to support faculty (legal, financial, logistical), as well as social and cultural barriers. We also developed a plan to advocate for structural changes designed to better support a collaborative model of teaching and learning. For instance, recommendations noted the need for inclusive development opportunities, collaborative positions and spaces, and additional resourcing. The findings were presented by the learning-community members at the 2017 Teach-In. In addition, a report of findings was shared with college administrators, the university's Faculty Teaching and Learning Center, the Center for Scholarly and Creative Excellence, the Division of Inclusion and Equity, and the Office for Community Engagement. While this report was submitted fewer than six months ago (at the time of this writing), numerous recommendations have borne fruit, including a set of student pathway prototypes, efforts to develop a lower-division course focused on the ethical challenges inherent to engagement and activism, and a co-authored, peer-reviewed essay on the learning community's approach (Lake, McFarland, & Jennrich, 2018). This shared effort both deepened my commitment to collaborative social justice work and helped me to explore the challenges related to bridging these divides.

Community-Based Learning Colloquia Series

As a faculty associate, I was also able to help create, facilitate, and assess a Community-Based Learning Colloquia Series for university faculty that ensured the voices of community partners and students were heard in every session. The colloquia series, for instance, covered issues surrounding student preparedness, the tensions among teaching, research, and service, the challenges to developing and sustaining partnerships, as well as questions around how faculty can engage with the university's Human Research Review Committee and the community when pursuing community-based research. As the assessment and report demonstrated, the learning community and the colloquia series helped fellow faculty and me to wrestle with the practical and ethical challenges of community engagement endeavors from other perspectives. Such a space can open stakeholders to the potential for short- and long-term repercussions. According to teacher-scholar-

practitioners in this field, many of these risks are unavoidable.¹¹ While none of these concerns were captured in the surveys completed by participants, moments of tension did arise (as did moments of connection, opportunities for collaboration, and next step possibilities). Indeed, the overwhelming success of the series and the need for faculty support led one of the university offices to formally support a faculty lead to oversee such workshops this academic year.

Social Justice Education

As an associate with the Division of Inclusion and Equity, I was also able to engage in an array of educational opportunities designed to deepen my awareness of my own privileges and to plan opportunities to help students and community partners do the same. Over the course of the fall 2016 to winter 2017 semesters, I completed inclusion advocate training, applied critical leadership training, and intergroup dialogue training (see <https://igr.umich.edu> for more information). I also attended workshops on structural racism; queer and trans 101; diversity, privilege, power, and leadership; and understanding micro-aggressions. Additionally, I attended and presented at the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity. I conducted a cross-disciplinary literature review of the ethical challenges of participatory action research and community engagement. These opportunities have generated greater awareness of the lived experience of others and deepened my awareness of my own power and privilege. They have also provided me with a host of strategies and tools for engaging more equitably and inclusively alongside marginalized populations.

What Have I Done in the Classroom?

While I realize there are no guarantees, I have adopted practices that work against oppression when engaging with students and community partners within current systems. The following is a brief description of a number of these practices:

- I have asked students to consider their own intersectional identities, requiring that they also visualize and reflect upon the complex positions from which others stand: What is the history behind the issue? How

¹¹ According to Tilley-Lubbs (2009), no matter how careful an instructor is, no matter how frequent and transformative in-class dialogues and readings are, “Othering” of community partners can still occur. According to Briggs (2013), collaborative engagement is inherently messy, implicating practitioners and requiring that they at times engage in work that goes against their values.

might that history shape the perspectives surrounding the issue now? What do they feel about the situation? What might others feel? What is the overall tone surrounding the issue?

- I have sought to create “brave” and “safe” spaces of trust and authenticity through the co-creation of dialogic guidelines, selected course readings that value community perspective, in-class discussions around dialogue and privilege, student exercises that value storytelling and listening, along with self-reflection activities. I have asked students to consider how well they listen, what they felt in these spaces and moments, as well as what they think others might be feeling (Arao & Clemens, 2013).
- I have tried to deepen students’ self- and other-awareness. For instance, I have had students complete personality assessments and reflect upon their learning styles, personal strengths, and potential challenges, as well as their preferred ways of interacting. I have asked them to discuss these differences and consider how they might best support one another, applying their strengths and pursuing avenues to meliorate any challenges they noted. I have also sought the assistance of the Social Justice, Counseling, and Career Centers in order to support student readiness for engaging across difference, help them to cope with the stress of such efforts and to align their lessons learned with their future personal, professional, and civic goals.
- I have worked to stay attentive to what and who might be left out of these conversations and, when possible, have invited those perspectives into the classroom.
- I have also conveyed that I do not have all the answers; instead, I partner with students and the community to co-create possible solutions.

What Can I Do Moving Forward?

I want to do more to help students understand their own positionality and learn about, from, and with various communities. For example, in the classroom I continually seek new ways to discourage students from investing me with unrealistic expertise and authority; I plan to employ strategies designed to help them see me as a co-inquirer who may hold more experience and limited (fallible)

expertise, but who does not and cannot provide “all” of the answers (and often very few). For instance, I plan to more deeply explore and employ critical, decolonizing pedagogical practices; intentionally share some of my own struggles with the academy and with community engagement opportunities; be honest about moments of failure; and open spaces for authentic vulnerability.

How else can I better support students in this work?

- I can do more to generate “brave” and “safe” spaces of trust, authenticity, and vulnerability (Arao & Clemens, 2013).
- I can generate deeper self- and other-awareness by expanding upon students’ self-assessment, asking them to also consider how their social identities may impact their interactions, how they might catch themselves in moments of bias and stereotyping, and how their lack of knowledge about others may get in the way of their understanding.
- I can expose students to a range of methods and ask that they consider both their merits and their dangers (including advocacy and deliberation, participation and resistance).
- I can honor depth over breadth.
- I can slow down and nurture students’ full selves.
- I can ask students to complete responsible conduct of research training and/or the human-subjects protection, reflect upon what they have learned, and consider how they might apply recommendations within their own research and lives.
- I can leverage the lessons, strategies, and tools learned over the past three years to provide students with opportunities to explore their own positionality through intergroup dialogue practices (Dessel & Rogge, 2008), deep diversity strategies (Choudhury, 2015), and group facilitation techniques.
- I can develop entry-level courses designed to better prepare students for the possibilities in and challenges surrounding collaborative engagement endeavors (Williams-Howe, Coleman, Hamshaw, & Westdijk, 2014);

- I can continue to try to move between worlds, seeking a balance (however imperfect) between support and critique (Brundiers, Wiek, & Kay 2013).

What Are My Conclusions in This Moment?

Over the past five years, I have come to the conclusion that there is only so much that can be done to advance this work within the confines of one class and one semester. My experience, my research into these fields, and my outreach to others have yielded a number of consistent concerns about the current academic move toward collaborative engagement. Thus, I pose and—this time—I offer a response to some pressing questions.

Under the current structures, do faculty, staff, community partners, and students have enough time to do this work well?
“No.”

Do we have the space and resources to come together across our differences?

“Usually not.”

Have we been educated or trained to do this work?

“Most often not.”

Do we provide students with enough support to engage others across their differences?

“Rarely.”

This list of concerns and questions could continue at length. Academic schedules (three-credit, discipline-specific courses and 15-week semester timelines) limit the depth and range of possibilities, restricting opportunities for deep self-reflexivity,¹² the growth of genuine and sustained relationships, and mutually beneficial, co-transformational outcomes (for students, the community, and the instructor).

¹² Self-reflexivity requires not only that we become more aware of our own position, but also that we explore the interaction between ourselves and our research, uncovering how our identities and positions shape the way we engage with issues of power and ethical challenges (Tilley-Lubbs, 2009).

Thus, moving forward, I hope to continue to find spaces and opportunities to advocate for systemic, procedural, and cultural change. Yes, practitioners must foster individual agency, capacity, and resiliency for this work, but they must also support those future boundary-spanners, change agents, and civic leaders via a more flexible, connected, and caring system.

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