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"How Community Means"

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Issues in Community Literacy

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Abstract

These brief remarks delve into the essence of community as purposeful connection. Through collaborative design interventions, it explores what it means to build relationships within communities in pursuit of environmental justice. The author shares his experiences from two research projects, which offer insights for community-based researchers dedicated to social transformation.

Keywords: community-based research, issues in community writing, collaborative-design interventions

The title of my opening remarks is "How Community Means." For me, *to mean* denotes having a purpose. I have always been interested in the creation of technical interventions that facilitate better relationships between people, their communities, and environments. The creation of these interventions has been the result of design work—broadly conceived—and has been a collaborative process in which I have had the privilege to collaborate with communities, center their concerns, needs, and hopes, and build things. The predicate for my title is to emphasize how we can continue to assemble and create opportunities *with* communities in pursuit of change and justice through design. What I'd like to do is briefly talk about two community-based projects that center design as a primary concern, offer you a sense of what I've learned, and perhaps portend what work we all might collectively accomplish as community-based researchers interested in literacy.

Moment no. 1: Understanding Food Insecurity & Designing for Security

In 2019, Dawn Opel and I had the opportunity to partner with the Food Bank Council of Michigan to make sense of data-driven approach to food insecurity. The Michigan Legislature uses a series of data products that help them determine resource allocation for food assistance throughout the state. They tracked pounds of food distributive throughout the state's pantry network and visualized that the result in the

form of a map. Dawn and I knew that the story of food insecurity (and food security) could not be told in terms of pounds of food distributed. We knew that we had to move beyond the seductive quality of data visualizations" and attend to the "dangerous implications for research quality, and the human subjects represented" (Hepworth p. 7-8). To truly understand how food insecurity manifests, we had to work with end-users of the pantry system—particularly a group of people who have little opportunity to design the data-driven tools (e.g., policies, software, data visualizations) that form the thorny thicket that prevents them from moving beyond a state of precarity. Central to our work was to ascertain how the interaction between design techniques and the community characteristics of end-users' influence data-collection, policymaking, and access to social services (e.g., Supplement Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, housing assistance, etc.); and devise how can we approach the design of databases and data visualizations from a bottom-up rather than top-down perspective, so that they capture the complexity of users' experiences rather than reducing them to discrete data points. Our conversations with staff and clients from two pantries revealed the need to rethink the definition of "food insecurity" to purposefully collect information that was often excluded at the point of the client intake process, because we fail to value people's expertise in the things they know the best—their own experiences.

Moment no. 2: Designing for Larger Participation in Water Governance

Since 2015, part of my ongoing work in Flint, MI has been to work with a group of community activists who formed an ad hoc group, which communication researchers and disaster sociologists refer to as emergent organizations, as they work to become "more cohesive and unified during situations of collective stress" and are "more innovative in resolving their problems and more resilient in the wake of severe challenges than they are given credit for" (Drabek and McEntire p. 99). Within the discipline of crisis communication, we rarely privilege the voices of those affected by emergent crises, choosing instead to favor issues of management, locating information, how and when information circulates, and whether information is accurate and useable. My work with this group has largely focused on what might happen if we were to amplify those voices. And perhaps, how can we, as researchers, go a step further by building mechanisms for more participation around water governance in communities to avoid the kind of crisis we saw in Flint. Our work has been to think creatively about what kind of resources can be developed to improve the community's resilience and also hold officials accountable. Some of this work has centered on the design of consumer confidence reports (CCRs).

CCRs, sometimes called "Annual Drinking Water Quality Reports," are federally-mandated documents that summarize information about the local drinking water for the previous year. CCRs emerge because of amendments to the 1996 Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA), which created the "right to know" more information about community water systems. In theory, CCRs help to raise consumer awareness of where their water comes from; inform consumers of the process by which their

water is delivered; educate consumers about water safety; and allow consumers to make more informed decisions regarding their drinking water. As important as these documents are, their design is heavily under researched. In fact, CCRs design have been influenced by the perspectives of engineers, scientists, and government regulators. These perspectives have led researchers and community advocates to argue that CCR's design alienate a public that has very little scientific literacy in a time when scientific literacy is more important than ever. Water crises from Flint, Michigan to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to Jackson, Mississippi have created a heightened sense of risk regarding the safety of our water systems. These crises have also created a heightened interest in citizen participation in water governance. Improving public participation in water governance necessitates designing good tools that can support citizens' contribution to deliberative processes. And this is currently what I'm doing as part of this group. We've endeavored to think about how a redesign of CCRs might allow for greater participation.

Each of these projects have centered empathy, creativity, iterative learning, and improvement in the pursuit of environmental justice. At their core, they recognize and contend with the latent impact of maleficent design—or what Rob Nixon refers to as "slow violence." However, in each of these opportunities, I've spent a lot of time meditating on what it means to be useful. In this regard, I've been motivated doubly by Jeffery Grabill's call for rhetoric researchers to pay attention to the knowledge work people are doing in the commonplaces of their lives and to consider expansively what larger facilitative roles we can play; as well as William Hart-Davidson's call of "Why not us?"—a call for technical & professional communication specialists to play more agentive roles in the design of the technologies that people interact with in the everyday.

I've learned many things in the process of these projects but what sits with me most are a set of provocations (or perhaps opportunities) and guiding questions that I think we might all collectively meditate upon.

Provocation #1: Changing the Model of When and How Community-based Research Happens

How can researchers shift from traditional researcher-led research design models to co-creation research models that centers community research concerns and actively involves community members as equal partners in the research process?

Considering the resource disparities between universities and community partners, what strategies can be implemented to build the capacity of community members to meaningfully contribute to research initiatives and ensure equitable collaboration?

I've been thinking a lot across projects about what we are doing to show communities that we are available and that the spaces of universities and colleges are theirs

just as much as ours. And that they have the capacity to do research that can affect change in their lives. In thinking about my project with the Food Bank Council, it should not take a group of researchers to recognize and explore a problem that members of a community are familiar on account of their everyday experiences. I'd like to see us build centers and research clusters in which community members bring problems to institutions and make community members a part of your research team. I've had the opportunity to create a couple of these ad hoc clusters, but I think that we can a should create more research opportunities like this. Part of this initiative involves moving from a researcher-led research design model in favor of a co-creation research model in which community research concerns lie at the center and all parties are seen as researchers. Much of the work we can do to facilitate this process is building the capacity of community members to actively participate in research initiatives. This requires investment in training, education, and skill development to support community members to contribute meaningfully to the research process. This might also require the development of resources within communities, so that they can do research on their own terms. Universities have greater access to funding, equipment, and institutional support compared to the community partners which who we collaborate. This resource disparity can create barriers to meaningful collaboration and limit the capacity of community members to fully engage in the research process.

Provocation #2: Avoiding Crisis-Driven Community-Based Research

How can researchers shift their focus from crisis-driven narratives to exploring and understanding community resilience in their community-based research endeavors?

How can we ensure that community-based research is conducted in an ethical and empowering manner that avoids potential harm and exploitation?

For a lot of researchers, community-based research that involves disaster and ruin is extremely compelling. I think that's a problem. Research in Flint has really opened my eyes to the way in which community-based research that emerges as the result of crisis can be predatory and perhaps do more harm than good. In the weeks after the Flint water crisis emerged, there was a seemingly endless torrent of researchers trying to establish research projects within the city. Perhaps this is why I've been reticent to publish on Flint. I found that more people were interested in reading about why *I* was doing in Flint and how that fit in *my* progress to tenure and promotion, which all paled in comparison to things I was encountering in Flint. I think that the Flint Water Crisis should remind us of the dangers of the top-down research model in which concern and expertise emerge from outside the community. In this moment, I felt less interested in being a researcher with respect to what I could offer the discipline and how I could benefit from that. And more interested in what I could offer the community. I think that everyone in here will agree that we will always benefit more than the communities with whom we collaborate. But I think we can get so mired in

doing research that we ignore a larger duty of care that asks us to be humans first and researchers second. Researchers like Eve Tuck, Laura Gonzales, and Cana Uluak Itchuaqiyaq have urged us to move beyond damaged-based research even if our intentions emerge from a space of benevolence. Top of FormIf we can choose to see communities like Flint in crisis, we can also choose to see these communities as resilient. Such a turn-in-phrase is a look toward imaging communities like Flint—post-crisis or outside the frame of crisis entirely. Suspending crisis-driven research and centering our research around community resilience promotes empowerment, reduces stigmatization, builds trust, and enhances psychological well-being.

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Author Bio

Donnie Johnson Sackey (he/him) is assistant professor in the Department of Rhetoric & Writing at the University of Texas at Austin where he teaches courses in environmental communication, information design, user-experience design, and nonprofit writing. He serves on the steering committee of the Polymathic Scholars Honors Program and the Bridging the Disciplines Smart Cities faculty panel. His research centers on the dynamics of environmental public policy deliberation, environmental justice, and environmental community-based participatory research. He is a non-resident fellow with the Center on Global Energy Policy's CarbonTech Development Initiative at Columbia University. His research has appeared in *Communication Design Quarterly, Community Literacy Journal*, *Present Tense*, *Rhetoric Review*, *Technical Communi-*

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