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Reconfigurations against barriers to scholar-activism

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

I reflect on the experiences and observations of my PhD journey so far, to elicit some of the barriers to activist work in the academy. I discuss how I have reconfigured my research practice in response to these barriers, and propose that research should be controlled by local communities. I call on members of the academy to reconfigure their own practices and their institutions. I conclude by presenting three provocative ideas for reconfigurations as inspirations for others. However, ultimately, reconfigurations should be situated in the relationships we have with our local communities. My references are relational rather than citational, to expose my influences and provide a resource for readers.

Full paper

I'm currently in my third year of my part-time PhD. In this time I have encountered several barriers to scholar-activist work.

The first barrier was myself, a failure to enunciate my values, and a lack of support to interrogate and nurture them and root my research within them. My first proposal was recuperative (honor ash 2023): it focused on co-producing simulation models with local authorities to help them combat 'obesity'. This did not align with my values, which I had been neglecting for years. It is only because a friend critiqued my proposal and pointed me towards fat activism (Hobbes 2018) that I was able to reorient my PhD.

There is a rigidity (carla bergman and Nick Montgomery 2017) which arises in practicioners and institutions over time. We are addicted to life. As our roots tap into the things we need to sustain ourselves, we grow protective. Could a researcher declare "the last ten years of my work have been misguided, wrong, harmful"? Could an institution announce "we will no longer accept funding from, or work with, for-profit corporations"? On a fundamental level, we must choose to commit to either the dynamic uncertainty of change, or the rigid certainty of a slowly narrowing path.

I discovered participatory/action research, and the expectation for researchers to center themselves in their work. As PhD students, we are examined on our capacity to produce individual contributions to a universal Knowledge; I must write up 'my' findings in 'my' thesis. Instead, participatory research emphasises messy experiences and emergent methodologies (Abma et al. 2018). It is possible to carry out participatory research for a PhD (Savory-Gordon 2003; Ortiz Escalante 2019), but it is not possible to get a PhD in research facilitation; it is not enough to enable communities to generate and act on

knowledge, we must demonstrate our 'ownership' of the work. Institutional ethics do not help with exploring the issues that run through participatory research (Groot et al. 2019).

To respond to these issues, I have reconfigured my practice by centering it on local communities. Now my PhD focuses on higher weight people in Blackpool, and will enable them to share their healthcare stories. I have defined an open-ended methodology which provides 'choice points' for participation (Vaughn and Jacquez 2020). I emphasise that 'research data' are personal and powerful, and will remain in the ownership of participants.

Community-led research begins with the needs of a community and enables them to lead on action. This means putting the needs of local communities above our own research interests. Start where you spend your time: your sports club, your pub, your children's schools. What are people's stories and needs? As we build relationships, opportunities to work together arise naturally. We can do this 'work' in our own time, and also when we are 'on the clock': forming connections in and learning about our local communities are valid research practices, and we should resist attempts to define and separate 'valid' and 'invalid' knowledges.

How can we push these transformations into our institutions, and reconfigure them to centre local communities? Here are some stray ideas.

First, examine who isn't present in the spaces and processes of your institutions, and bring them in. Do your funding and ethics panels include local community members? Do they include 'stakeholders' (Reed 2022) from established organisations? Do those people 'represent' (Fox and Alldred 2023) the interests and needs of local people, or are they complicated with vested interests? How much locally-focused research is happening at your institution? Is it facilitatory?

Second, establish local research journals, specialising in publishing research by, for, and about local communities. They should be open access, with appealing, plain language outputs. The editorial teams should include local community members.

Third, resist the expansion of city campuses. Land is a scarce resource, and campus expansions are neoimperialist projects (McNeill et al. 2022). Instead, universities should be investing in community centres, cafés, libraries, and third spaces owned by local communities, to be shared by academics and non-academics. These spaces, and researchers, should not be concentrated in cities, but distributed across the land.

These issues and their solutions are rooted in the ways institutions and local communities do and don't communicate about, and share ownership of, projects and resources. The starting points are the networks of relationships we form within our own communities, and the bridges we build between communities and institutions.

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