

Building Critical Community Engagement through Scholarship: Three Case Studies

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ABSTRACT Drawing on a shared recognition that community is defined, understood, constructed, and reconstructed through contextually inflected relationships, collaborating authors use diverse interdisciplinary case studies to argue that rigorous community-engaged scholarship advances capacities for critical pursuit of cognitive and social justice. Whether through participant-centred projects undertaken with youth in government care networks, cross-cultural explorations of Indigenous and non-Indigenous science and culture as resources for food security, or facilitated dramatizations of community relations impacted by neo-liberal ideologies, contributors affirm welcoming co-learning environments that engage multiple forms of knowledge expression and mobilization. The respectful spaces held in these community-researcher collaborations enable new advances beyond hegemonic knowledge development institutionalized through colonialist histories. This essay theorizes prospects for building transformative community through scholarship, citing practical examples of the principles and practices that foster or frustrate sustainable communities. It explores the institutional arrangements and power dynamics between and among actors, asking who gets included and excluded, and what boundaries are created and crossed around complex, contradictory, and contested notions of “community.”

KEYWORDS community-engaged scholarship, food security, cognitive justice, decolonizing methodologies, participatory theatre

With the aid of three interdisciplinary case studies in local, national, and international contexts, this essay examines the different ways that “community” is defined, understood, constructed, and reconstructed by community-engaged and contextually inflected scholarship. If community-engaged scholarship has responded to concerns about overly detached universities needing to become more relevant and responsible (Smith, 1999; 2005), community both inside and outside universities has often been presumed to be unproblematically available—unusually singular, stable, and self-evident—for both study and action. The left and the right, individualist and collectivist traditions, all desire but cannot attain “exclusive title to community” (Findlay & Findlay, 1995, p. 4). Similarly, community-university partnerships are often seen as panacea, glib guarantors of culturally and politically productive partnerships (Macdonald & Chrisp, 2005). In other words, like community-university partnerships, community itself is insufficiently theorized.