

From the Editor ...

We've Come a Long Way ... Methods and Methodologies for Community-Engaged Scholarship

Often-cited limitations in scholarship related to community engagement and outreach include weak theoretical foundations, limited generalizability of findings due to small sample sizes, inadequate number of longitudinal studies to provide a full assessment of education and community change and outcomes over periods of time, heavy reliance on unsubstantiated self-reports, and limited ability to aggregate data due to wide variations in community engagement purposes and practices across programs and sites (*Furco & Holland, 2013*). Although researchers continue to focus on these issues, more recent submissions to *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement (JHEOE)* have shown a greater number and wider variety of methods, reflecting more mature inquiry method selection and application in the field. In essence, we've come a long way from the advocacy, anecdotal, applied, best practices research and reporting that dominated much of the earlier published work.

This sophistication in research design and methods that enables deeper and more rigorous exploration of outstanding questions in community engagement reflects the evolution of methodologies across the conduct of scholarly thought and practice as research and evaluation. Sage, publisher of research methods journal content and resources, frequently asks researchers, "What are the most exciting trends in the fields of research methods, statistics and evaluation?" Their recent poll identified seven trends in research methods: (1) digital qualitative methods, (2) online interviews and focus groups, (3) applied anthropology methods, qualitative/ethnography, (4) complexity theory, (5) the intersections of qualitative research practice with the sciences, (6) design-based research, and (7) critical race theory approaches to quantitative methods. (For links to specific articles on each of these methodological areas, see *Sage Publishing, 2016*.)

We are excited that the community-engaged scholarship methodologies in recent *JHEOE* submissions reflect some of these trends. This issue features works that, in addition to being sound, peer-reviewed articles, highlight their methodologies. Appropriately for our maturing field, these methodologies facilitated the cocre-

ation of knowledge through democratic practices with and across their full range of participants: institutions, community members, faculty members, students, and administrators. The authors used approaches that also were designed to gain a deeper understanding of the research questions in ways that transcend the bare numeric values obtained through “often meaningless ‘pre-post’ surveys” (Battistoni, 2014, p. 55). The articles in this issue include an addendum in which the authors briefly speak to their research design and method selection and reflect on their choice and experience. As an editor, I was particularly impressed with two aspects of the research processes detailed across this set of articles: The authoring teams have thoroughly described their data analysis processes, and they have addressed institutional research board (IRB) approvals involving community and other organizational partners.

The authoring team of Bowen, Gordon, and Chojnacki, from Barry University, drew on an aptly contemporary inquiry methodology for an equally up-to-date topic. Using Gee’s (2014) critical discourse analysis, these authors examined how students employed social media for engagement. Use of social media is ubiquitous among students and much of the population at large, but as a scholarly topic the medium remains underrepresented in the literature. Bowen et al. followed students as they experienced the practical ins and outs of using social media for social advocacy.

Matthew Johnson, from Central Michigan University, employed a grounded theory methodology to better understand college students’ civic identity development. Grounded theory has been in use for many years; however, Johnson specifically used Charmaz’s (2014) approach, which emphasizes the cocreation of theory with subjects, an approach consistent with the principles of community-engaged scholarship. Johnson’s article is noteworthy for its thorough description of his data analysis process, which involved his subjects in many ways, particularly through two levels of member-checking.

Like Johnson, Dennis McCunney in his dissertation overview reports on his study of civic identity development. Rather than applying a grounded theory perspective, however, he used an ethnographic case study, an approach that provided “an opportunity to focus on the nuances in the life of an institutional subculture” (p. 65). This methodology was particularly appropriate for the case setting: a Jesuit university with a pervasive “magis” culture.

To counter the lack of longitudinal studies in community-engaged scholarship, Ufnar, Bolger, and Shepherd from Vanderbilt

University report on a retrospective investigation of 10 years of a 17-year Scientist in the Classroom Partnership (SCP) program. Their findings, based on qualitative and quantitative data, offer assessment of the SCP program while examining what the science fellows, teachers, and students brought to and took from the program. These findings will be particularly helpful to others looking to sustain their STEM university–K-12 partnerships.

Two other articles also take a long-term perspective. Historical inquiry is a methodology seldom seen in our field. Jan Hunzicker, in her reflective essay, not only reports on a historical narrative project of a two-decade professional development school partnership with 10 area schools, but describes how it was done as a collaborative writing project. Having been involved in many collaborative writing projects, but none close to the scale and scope of this Kemper History project, I was riveted. The methodology behind orchestrating and accomplishing this project is, in itself, a good read!

In contrast to historical analysis, community-based participatory research (CBPR) is becoming a mainstay in our field; however, this methodology is not necessarily conducted with authentic community engagement. In their project with promise, the authoring team from the University of South Alabama provides a retrospective of a long-term (2004–present) community-based participatory research venture to address health disparities. Although the article focuses attention on the consolidation of academic gains, the researchers' overall effort is an exemplar of community-engaged scholarship and the resulting institutionalization of CBPR. I especially appreciated their unvarnished discussion of the challenges encountered in this methodology and the helpful responses they devised. How they handled the IRB approval in their CBPR and how they achieved their extensive dissemination outcomes merit particular attention.

Investigating the complexities of institutional change efforts that involve university structures, process, and culture takes on new dimensions of challenge when performed as a multidepartment, cross-institutional collaborative initiative and study. A western Michigan higher education multidisciplinary research team reports on just such an endeavor in “Shifting Engagement Efforts Through Disciplinary Departments: A Mistake or a Starting Point?” In this project, a systemic action research approach (*Burns, 2014*) was integral to the Grand Rapids Engaged Department Initiative's evolution, as it yielded real-time findings to the collaborative ongoing interventions. Further, the research process was itself an interven-

tion, as systemic action research practices “not only document, but also impact the processes, programs, activities, and systems of support engaged throughout each stage of the collaboration” (p. 142).

Finally, Jones and Lee approach our field with a truly sweeping scope, presenting a trend analysis in “A Decade of Community Engagement Literature: Exploring Past Trends and Future Implications.” Using descriptive statistical methods, these authors analyze 10 years of publications appearing in *JHEOE*, examining such dimensions as subject category and methodological approach. This article also serves to test the chosen analytical framework as a basis for exploring similar trends in a wider range of scholarly journals.

I encourage you to carefully read the articles in this issue for both the rigor of their methodological approaches and the freshness of the authors’ experiences. These works add to a growing body of evidence that scholars, academy- and community-based, are no longer limited to methods traditionally associated with community-engaged explorations. Our field has come a long way, but further education, training, and advocacy are still needed so community-engaged scholars can better utilize updated and intriguing methods of inquiry for scholarly endeavors.

With best regards,
Lorilee R. Sandmann
Coeditor

References

- Battistoni, R. M. (2014). Beyond service and service-learning: Educating for democracy in college. *Higher education exchange 2014* (pp. 53–64). Dayton, OH: The Kettering Foundation.
- Burns, D. (2014). Systemic action research: Changing system dynamics to support sustainable change. *Action Research, 12*(1), 3–18.
- Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Furco, A., & Holland, B. (2013). Improving research on service learning institutionalization through attention to theories of organizational change. In P. Clayton, R. Bringle, & J. Hatcher (Eds.), *Research on service learning* (pp. 505–535). Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Gee, J. P. (2014). *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Sage Publishing. (2016, June 17). 7 trends in research methods [Web log post]. Retrieved from <https://connection.sagepub.com/blog/sage-connection/2016/06/17/7-trends-in-research-methods/>