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Todd Kelshaw

Montclair State University, kelshawt@montclair.edu

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Administering Community-Engaged Pedagogies: Toward an Anticipatory Approach to Problems

Todd Kelshaw¹

Community-engaged pedagogies are optimism-borne. But problems inevitably arise, and administrators/practitioners might react in ways that hamper projects' potentials. This essay addresses the nature of problems to be expected during community-engaged work; the need for an "anticipatory" administrative approach; and how a communication-centric orientation affords particular capacities. Notably, communication-disciplinary community engagement administrators are particularly poised to manage problems in anticipatory ways.

Problems of Community-Engaged Pedagogies

Community-engaged administrator/practitioners should appreciate the nature of problems. Problems are inevitable, mutually consequential, and various.

Problem Inevitability

There are many risks of community-engaged work, most fundamentally that one might imagine things working perfectly. But complexities ensure challenges to thoughtfully laid plans, in ways small (e.g., transportation challenges) and large (e.g., exacerbation of racial tensions).

Anticipation is hindered by abundant celebratory literature, which strives to institutionally expand community-engaged pedagogies while downplaying hazards (Butin, 2006). Advocates often exhort, "just get out there and do it!" without acknowledging risks (Kelshaw, Lazarus, & Minier, 2009, p. xx). While focusing on hoped-for societal and educational benefits, it is hard to imagine problems.

Problem Mutuality

Community-engaged pedagogies are done *with*—among educators, students, partners, community residents, funders, etc. Reciprocity is a hallmark; in shifting ideals from doing *for* to doing *with* (London, 2000, p. 4), there is a "concerted move from charity to justice, from service to the elimination of need" (Jacoby, 2003, p. 5). In reciprocity, problems affect all stakeholders—and they do so distinctly.

Educators-as-project-initiators might assume that they, chiefly, are responsible for and affected by problems. A prospective partner's email, though, illustrates mutual vulnerability:

I . . . appreciate the student support, but also want to make sure that it is done in a professional and ethical way. . . . [T]he potential for unethical or disrespectful actions (albeit almost always unintended) by students . . . is high, and in these kind of partnerships, as the direct conduit between the community and students, I take responsibility for making sure community members don't feel like they're being

¹ Montclair State University

objectified or demeaned and that the actions of students don't disrupt or harm a relationship between [the organizations and community] residents, as we're still here after the class ends and students go home. . . . (Anonymous, personal communication, March 21, 2018)

Stakeholdership is not a simple bi-lateral partnership between an academic institution and an organizational partner but a multi-lateral system that engages community residents, affiliate organizations, etc. A problem for one is a problem experienced—albeit differently—by all.

Problem Variousness

While circumstantially specific, problems reflect prevalent, identifiable genres. Fore-knowledge of genres may spur anticipatory cross-stakeholder planning. Toward a typology of problems experienced by community-engaged educators, readers are urged to report their problem-experiences via an IRB-approved survey: https://montclair.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_02ECIK7MU7ke8Dz. Submissions inform categorization that may guide effective community engagement.

While a full presentation of reported problem-types is beyond this essay's scope, examples include:

Category:	Examples:
Transportation logistics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public transportation limitations • Parking constraints
Scheduling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students/partners availability • Irregularity/unpredictability of activities
Students' preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attitudinal impediments (e.g., disinterest, cultural insensitivity) • Inadequate content/technical knowledge
Partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinating multiple participants • Personnel turnover
Structural inequities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relational/intercultural dynamics • Campus/community relationships
Financial/material resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource-provision responsibility conflicts • Inadequate resources

Fore-knowledge of such problem-types may inform an anticipatory approach.

Toward an Anticipatory Approach

One might manage unanticipated problems in unilateral and reactive ways, disrupting reciprocal communication patterns and impeding collaboration. Communication engagement administrators/practitioners should move from an attitude of control to a “problem” orientation, and from tactics of reactivity to proactivity and responsiveness.

From an Attitude of Control to a “Problem” Orientation

In Welch's (2000) conception, an "ethic of control" assumes that "effective action is unambiguous, unilateral and decisive" (p. 25). In community engagement contexts, "partnerships . . . experience setbacks and defeats, . . . resulting in exasperation and demoralization that perpetuate the control orientation by fostering self-interest. . . . Single-handedness rather than collaboration is the preferred mode for identifying and solving community problems" (Natale, Brook, & Kelshaw, 2007, p. 46). For Gibb (2012), control entails "[s]omeone . . . trying to do something to someone else—to change an attitude, to influence behavior, or to restrict the field of activity" (p. 355).

An anticipatory approach, differently, manifests an "ethic of risk" (Welch, 2000, p. 14), which "shifts concern from unilaterally produced outcomes to collaborative partnership processes, entailing members' critical engagement and ongoing reflection. . . . Throughout, participants should be reciprocally open and responsive to critical insights from different perspectives" (Natale et al., 2007, p. 46). Gibb (2012) describes this as a "problem orientation": a desire "to collaborate in defining a mutual problem and . . . seeking its solution . . . [with] no pre-determined solution, attitude, or method to impose" (p. 355).

From Reactivity to Proactivity and Responsiveness

Applying an attitude of control to unanticipated problems fosters *reaction*: unilateral measures that disregard problem-mutuality. Reaction is an isolated and unreflective behavior, entailing concern for quick bandaging rather than collaboratively realized options.

An anticipatory approach foresees problems—not necessarily in their specificity but in their *possibility*. It assumes that problems will arise and affect stakeholders variously, and mandates that partners have frank preparatory discussions and contingency planning.

Such preparation establishes not only shared visions and plans, but a communication system among stakeholders enabling conjoined responsiveness: a mutually reflective awareness of choices (Stewart, 2012, pp. 34–35). In responding, there is collective power, toward which partners must communicate not just about message-contents but about the communication process itself. Meta-communication allows shared understandings about process-outcome connections, and ongoing improvement of collaboration and relationship-making. This entails explication of communicative ideals, observation of stakeholders' interaction, reflective awareness of what is/is not functioning well, and communication-process revisions.

The Value of Communication-disciplinary Expertise

While no academic discipline has a claim on community engagement, it is noteworthy that communication-disciplinary administrators/practitioners are particularly poised for an anticipatory approach. To bring communication-disciplinary knowledge, observational skills, and reflectiveness to stakeholders' interaction supports a problem orientation that girds proactive, responsive tactics.

Conceptual Knowledge

In stakeholder interaction, a discipline-specific understanding of communication's relational, constitutive nature allows administrators/practitioners to move from managerial coordination (for efficiency) to engaged collaboration (for innovation) (Denise, 1999). A constitutive conception's assumption that no individual controls meaning (Stewart, 2012, pp.

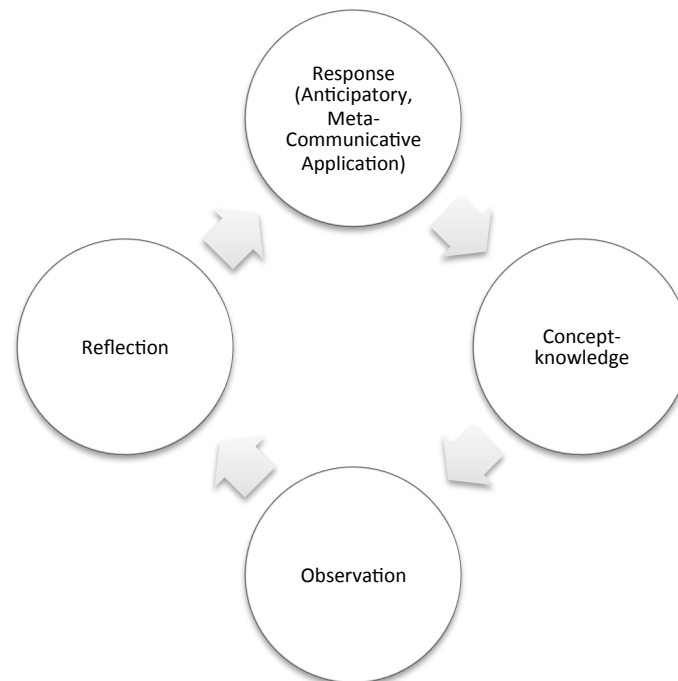
22–23) restrains unilateral impulses and promotes equality. To understand communication as a “process that produces and reproduces shared meaning” (Craig, 1999, p. 125)—rather than as a mere tool for transmitting information (Stewart, 1995, pp. 11–12)—maximizes conditions for shared understandings among stakeholders toward creative, joint problem solving.

Observational Skills

Communication-disciplinary empirical training enables communication-process awareness and comprehension. Sensitivity to dynamics is crucial for recognizing task-related and relational interactional qualities throughout project-work’s preparatory, execution, and aftermath phases. Attending to subtle communication features impels stakeholders’ meta-communication.

Reflectiveness

Responsiveness requires reflectiveness: being aware “of what’s around us [and] also . . . aware of our awareness” (Stewart, 2012, p. 35). Reflection is achieved by extending conceptual knowledge and observation to understand communication-system dynamics. Through reflection comes thoughtful response—an anticipatory approach’s essence.



The reflection needed for effective community engagement integrates “understanding . . . into one’s experience . . . to enable better choices or actions in the future as well as enhance one’s overall effectiveness” (Rogers, 2001, p. 41). A communication-disciplinary orientation prepares such reflection, which is enhanced through collaboration—not solitary thought. “Talking with others about your experiences can help you to consider perspectives other than your own” (Ash, Clayton, & Day, 2005, p. 11).

Conclusion

Community-engaged administrators/practitioners should assume that problems will arise and impact stakeholders distinctly. Familiarized with prominent problem-genres, they may build anticipation into their designs and problem-solve responsively. Communication-disciplinary knowledge, observational skills, and reflectiveness particularly support an anticipatory orientation.

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