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A Tool for Informing Community-Engaged Projects

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Abstract

While research suggests that community-engaged projects can be particularly effective, such work is notoriously time consuming and not scalable. The learning curve for an organization seeking to start such work is steep. Additionally, it is important to evaluate to what extent work typified as community engaged work actually creates a participatory space of community-centered perspectives regarding roles, interests, worldviews, actions and outcomes. To this end, we developed a formative assessment tool using previously identified domains [1]. This tool, created in partnership between a university and an outreach group affiliated with the Air Force, allows organizations to evaluate existing projects and explore ways to develop on a path towards true community-engagement. The outreach group in this case undertakes significant STEM education within New Mexico, but in the past, a majority of the work has been done "for" or "to" communities, rather than "with" communities. We share development and initial use of the tool. By using the tool, several members made aspects of their work more explicit. Specifically, members shared ways they sought ideas, feedback, and insight from teachers, and how this informed their ongoing work. While the initial use of the tool revealed some uncertainty about community engagement, it opened space to value and expand existing practices aligned to community engagement. With increased use of the tool, members came to see some of their existing practices that were already aligned to community-engagement as more valued, and the individuals who led such work were positioned as contributing expertise, rather than anecdotes. Ongoing use of the tool, paired with leadership support, is driving the organization to change how they view community roles.

Introduction and purpose

Despite many calls to diversify engineering and the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) degree programs and workforce more broadly, to date, limited progress has been made. To address what some have characterized as a "leaky pipeline," scholars have recommended, among several strategies, forming "strategic partnerships" [2]. We argue that such partnerships should aim to be community-engaged in order to broaden participation.

Engineering education has a long history of forming partnerships and providing opportunities for students to design solutions for communities. Much of this has come in the form of capstone design projects and programs like *Engineers without Borders* [3-6], and in response to the recognition that to be effective engineers, students need to be able to consider the impacts their design decisions have on communities [7]. Supported by college staff, individual faculty, student programs, or community-engagement offices in universities, such programs have made strides to provide such learning opportunities for students. Yet, for many organizations that have funds to support efforts to broaden participation, this work takes them into relatively unchartered territory.

Inspired by past work on teacher professional development [8] and ways an assessment tool can shape such development [9], we sought to create an *educative* tool to guide organizations on this pathway. In this paper, we share our design process and the theory undergirding our decisions, detail the tool, and share insights from initial use of the tool.

Theoretical framework and background

In developing an educative community-engagement tool for organizations, we were guided by Freire's notion of false generosity and decolonizing methodologies and praxis. We drew from past analysis that characterized domains of work within community-engaged projects [1].

When an organization seeks to broaden participation in engineering, yet does not possess deep understanding of the communities they seek to impact, their efforts may not only be misaligned to actual needs, they may the perpetuate power dynamics and inequities they sought to address. Freire characterized this as "false generosity"—as charity offered that does not empower, but instead fosters dependency. While such aid may help individuals, it also sustains inequities [10].

Addressing inequality in engineering education means interrogating the origins of inequalities. Efforts to unravel those systems requires the knowledge of decolonization and engaging in decolonizing methodologies [11]. This is important to reflect on because when organizations enter a community, they often act in colonizing ways and extend oppressive systems masquerading as aid. Decolonizing methodologies center community knowledge and needs and foreground the community's own purposes.

Such work is effortful and time consuming, but can lead to lasting, socially just change in educational access and economic outcomes for historically marginalized communities. This work involves *praxis*—confronting oppression and injustice through learning, action, and repeated reflection on the ways actions reverberate into society [11]. Anti-oppressive practices stem from self-reflexivity and introspection that aims to align actions with the values and ethics of the work.

Community engaged work enlists those who are most affected by a community issue. This can be in collaboration or partnership with others who have particular skills or resources with the goal of devising strategies to resolve it. Community engaged work adds to or replaces programming done on community members with programs done for or with community members, so that the results both come from and go directly back to the people who need them most and can make the best use of them. Community-engaged work combats false generosity as a way to support community emancipation from oppressive conditions. As community-engaged approaches have become sophisticated in the community health field as community-based participatory research (CBPR), we drew upon analysis that characterized key issues [1]. Specifically, analysis of 253 CBPR projects surfaced key areas that such projects should include community agency as the rationale for the issue, community member roles, the strategies used to address the issue, and the outcomes. As such, their work revealed multiple ways community agency—the degree to which community organizations and members play a role in making decisions about the program [12]—can be a driving force within a project. We detail how we used these insights to design an educative tool for an organization interested in developing community-engaged engineering education opportunities.

There are particular tensions organizations must navigate in doing community engaged work. These tensions have been identified as: participation, power, and knowledge democracy [13]. Participation in community engaged approaches can exist on a continuum [14]. Different levels of participation can occur at various stages in the research process from problem identification, program design, through data analysis and dissemination. Rifkin [20] writes that participation should be seen as a complex and iterative process, which can change, grow or diminish based on

the dynamics of power, and the historical and social context of the research project. Ture culturally centered and engaged work should work to involve the community at all levels of the research process. Knowledge democracy is a tension that concerns the question of by whom, about whom, and for what purposes is knowledge defined [14]. Other research settings often ignore, discount, or erase the "community evidence" and local knowledge necessary to create culturally effective and sustainable interventions. An important part of knowledge democracy is the acknowledgement that published evidence-based science is only a fraction of the knowledge that exists, and that knowledge can and does already exist within communities. It is the purpose of community engaged work to elevate and utilize this knowledge and knowledge sources. In order to deal with this tension imbued in research community centered work recognizes multiple ways of knowing, and the power for knowledge to be a tool for social action [17]. Also, this approach recognizes the lived experiences of people as valid and important to knowledge construction and co-construction. Power, a primary tension that also must be navigated, is implicated in all other tensions. The role of power should be a crucial consideration for the for those wishing to engage in culturally and community centered practices. Power is an invisible force that without acknowledgement is allowed to manifest, influence and prevents knowledge democracy and full participation. A true engaged approach fosters trust and power sharing. Cornwall & Jewkes [16] points out that a significant difference in the CBPR approach is "the attitudes of researchers, which in turn determine how, by and for whom research is conceptualized and conducted, and the corresponding location of power at every stage in the research process. In order to deal with these tensions, organizations should take on a practice of cultural humility, considering how their own positions of power whether through education, race, community status and gender influence [17]. It is important to acknowledge that these tensions are real and exist when engaging in culturally centered and community engaged practices. It is the responsibility of the organization to actively navigate these tensions to maintain ethically engaged work with communities.

Community engaged work is a transformative process that if done appropriately, not only builds equitable and lasting partnerships but moves communities towards emancipation. True transformation in this kind of work happens not only for the community buy reinforcing agency but also changes the partnering organization through the knowledge gained form the community and partnership as well as well as a shift in the ideological perspective for which to approach working with communities.

Methods

This project, undertaken as a research-practice partnership, investigated the following research questions:

1. What key design decisions shaped an educative tool for community-engagement?
2. In what ways did the development and initial use of an educative tool for community-engagement alter norms, values displayed, and commitments in the organization?
3. What tensions did members contend with in this process?

This paper, authored by university scholars with expertise in community-engagement and engineering education, and members of an outreach and STEM education organization within a military branch, shares insights from our development process and initial use of an educative community-engagement tool. Set in a minority-majority state with significant rural populations, the organization sought to broaden participation of Hispanic, Latino/a/x, Native American,

African American, and low-income students. Motivated by research suggesting that more diverse groups can leverage their diverse knowledge and experiences to develop better and more innovative solutions, their prior efforts at broadening participation appeared to be driven exclusively by their staff's knowledge. With access to significant resources, they sought guidance from university partners, who brought knowledge and frameworks about ways to avoid replicating the systems that have disenfranchised and marginalized these groups historically.

We documented our development and implementation process through versions, field notes, and audio recordings of meetings. The development process began with conversations that established the goals and built trust. We conducted a literature review, which we synthesized into initial conceptual targets for the tool. We also searched for extant tools, finding examples of guidelines for community-engagement and many claims made by similar organizations that they valued community-engagement, but no tools of the sort we envisioned. We therefore also reviewed educative tools from other projects as inspiration, drawing from these ideas about how to embed opportunities to learn fundamental ideas about community-engagement. We created an initial version of the tool and pilot tested it with ourselves, then with members of the organization who had not been deeply involved in its development.

We used Descript software to produce initial transcriptions of audio records. We analyzed these to identify the key design decisions we made, and to characterize changes that might be attributed to the process of developing and using the tool.

Results and discussion

We organize our results by research question.

Key design decisions

Our first question focused on the key design decisions that shaped an educative tool for community-engagement (see Appendix for an excerpt of the tool).

Our first key decision was to prioritize community agency. Based on our literature review, and as noted in our framework, we found that community agency should factor into the design of programs intended to address educational opportunity and outcome inequities in four ways [1]. First, in mature community-engaged projects, the rationale for the issue should come from the community. This means that community members themselves mobilized to advocate for their educational priorities and reached out to the organization for technical assistance or support, but that community members knew what their needs and priorities were. In such situations, the organization is invited to provide support or partnership. This invited relationship reflects the greatest community control because it started "where the people are."

Second, such projects involve community members in roles where they have full control over the program design and activities, while the organization acts as a support. Third, and related to the second, community members steer program development activities. They identify learning needs, plan and implement the activity or curriculum, assess the learning outcomes, and make decisions about how and to whom outcomes are reported, whereas the organization provides support when needed or invited. Full community control demonstrates a great degree of equity and power sharing, with the community as the authority.

Fourth, the community has agency over the outcomes, while acknowledging that educational outcomes are influenced by social, economic and structural factors. Thus, mature projects include interventions also address social, political or economic barriers to participation. In such projects, community members collect and control their own data, and their own narrative, and the data are used in ways that benefit the community. Both community members and organization partners engage in critical reflection to understand the impacts of their work, and they learn through this process. Finally, the project outcomes include promoting long-term, sustainable, educational programming that alleviates educational and economic inequities. While the organization may help secure funding for the long-term sustainability of the program within the community organization, it yields the ownership of the program and funding to the hands of the community members who have the capacity to shepherd services and activities in the long term, fostering autonomy.

However, as an educative tool, we recognized that organizations new to such work would not likely be ready to shift their work so dramatically. This led to three additional decisions. We aimed to depict various levels of work on a trajectory to community engagement, while also mitigating the sense that there was a "right" and "wrong" answer. We feared social desirability could lead those using the tool to avoid characterizing their project accurately if the descriptions seemed to suggest they were doing something wrong. We reviewed other tools, such as a performance assessment tool that aided teachers to characterize their assessments using a range of inauthentic to authentic factors [9], and this precedent supported our thinking about how to communicate various likely options to organization members. We also took inspiration from the kinds of quizzes seen in magazines, where each question has answers lettered (i.e., A, B, C, D) and the quiz taker reads their results based on these (i.e., "If you answered mostly As, you…). In addition to careful wording, we saw this format as a means to mitigate the sense of being ranked.

We wanted to invite members of the organization to comfortably place themselves on the trajectory toward becoming community engaged, not reject it as out of reach. Thus, to also offer opportunities to learn and grow, we linked the categories (e.g., mostly Bs) to descriptions and ideas; for example:

> "Your program is characterized as for the community. The role of the community is consultant. There may be an advisory board that the organization selected or identified out of convenience. This type of board is not representative of the community makeup and does not encourage participation from individuals from multiple social locations within the community. The organization is guiding the program activities or solutions and the board is selecting out of a set of previously determined options. Organization is collaborating to ensure community approval of the program. A program characterized with this level of community voice shows some degree of power sharing but does not acknowledge the range of knowledge that exists within the community. This type of program would benefit from a more actively diverse board reflective of the desired reach of the program. Additionally, should consider including more community voice in the program design reflective of the community values and experiences. Those harder to reach participants that the organization may be wanting to reach may not be accessed through this method. The organization can take more time to identify and non-participating community members and talk about their past experiences in the

> community and the current barriers they are facing in being more active members. Additionally, the organization should reach out to those less involved community members and identify strengths that could benefit the program and benefits they can gain from participating more actively."

In order for the tool to truly be educative, it also needed to be accepted by the organization's members, who needed to understand how and when to use it. To support this, we added framing about its purpose and use, including a preamble that introduced some of the key terms used, though others were defined in the footer along the way as a form of just-in-time instruction. The front section signposted the remainder of the tool and suggested when to use the tool, "This tool may be beneficial when planning a new program or refining an existing program. It may be helpful to use this tool with other members of your organization as well as with community partners. This tool is designed to be both evaluative and educational. It will identify at which level your program is currently preforming, as well as help to gain insight into how your organization can improve engagement with the community and power sharing within the partnership. In each case, the focus is on the potential of the program to build lasting equitable partnerships and help sustain long term community agency. This tool assumes that the organization is seeking to enhance the role of the community in the formation and/or redesign of the program." We also developed a section for the organization to describe the program.

Finally, we added a reflection, aligned to the notion of critical reflexivity and to research on learning. We reasoned that those completing the tool might benefit from reflection and the opportunity to capture their insights and plan next steps by responding to the following questions:

- What did you learn about your current level of community engagement in planning this program?
- What insights have you gained in ethical community engagement processes?
- What do you plan on doing moving forward to improve your engagement methods in planning this program?

Changes in norms, values displayed, and commitments

Our second research question investigated how participation in the development and initial use of an educative tool for community-engagement altered norms, values displayed, and commitments in the organization.

We pilot tested the tool with organization members, asking them to evaluate, for instance, a prospective project about which they were skeptical, as well as historical projects about which they were familiar but not responsible for. We made refinements based on their feedback and provided a revised tool for them to use. With encouragement from the leader, they began a planning a new project with the tool as a starting place. We contrast, in particular, ways the STEM education staff reported on their work prior to using the tool and afterwards.

First, when updating the team at a standing meeting prior to using the tool, we observed that they made few references to teacher input. Teachers, when mentioned, seemed almost incidental. The staff gave explanations for their ideas as their own. However, in later sessions, after working with the tool, we saw many more accounts of the ideas they gained from their work with teachers. As they shared about one of their programs, they explained how often they made

changes based on teachers' suggestions. We see this as representing a shift in what was explicitly valued in the organization. As the leader responded well, the staff more commonly justified changes they made in reference to teacher-expressed needs. While we would not yet categorize such moves as community-engaged, it did reveal that, rather than primarily designing *on* or *to* the community as the leader feared, much of their work could be categorized as *for* and sometimes *with* the community.

Perhaps emboldened by both this insight and the ideas presented in the tool, the leader made a commitment to engage in a slower, deliberate process that would be more clearly *with* the communities. This process, ongoing at the time of writing, involves partnering with two different schools on the "same" project idea. While the organization developed initial ideas, they remained much more tentative than is their practice, staying open to major revisions and even rejection from the partners.

Tensions

Our third research question sought to surface tensions members contended with in this process. First, the expert in community-engagement faced challenges related to terminology and scope. Because she understood the transformative potential of a high-fidelity community-engaged approach, but also the complexity of such work, she struggled with how to share this vision with newcomers. Partnering with a member of the organization and with someone with expertise in engineering education was key to ensuring that the tool was educative, not overwhelming. As an example of this, we were selective about terms that would be familiar to experts in decolonizing methodologies and community-engagement. We spent significant time negotiating terminology with members of the organization, ensuring definitions were accessible and made these terms usable.

Another tension surfaced as members embarked on partnering with two different schools. One school felt more like their typical work. Teachers, accustomed to their roles primarily as implementers, not designers of curricula, were eager to accept eager well-developed curricula that aligned to their needs. Partnering with another school, however, brought out challenges. As a school that prided itself on developing much of its curricula, these teachers were eager to have the organization support their work in ways where they either lacked resources (e.g., developing and custom printing some instructional objects for students) or time. For the STEM education staff in the organization, this role felt unsatisfying, especially as they observed the proposed activity become less rich. To offset this, they referenced their stronger design role with the other school, and also offered to develop some supplemental activities that could enhance the learning experience.

Conclusions

We made key design decisions to develop an educative community-engagement tool that organizations can use to grow their capacity to engage partners in engineering education that has greater potential to broaden participation by enhancing community agency. Central in this process, we aimed to depict, without judgement, common ways organizations might seek to offer educational programs and supports, thus inviting members to characterize and locate their programs on a trajectory. We see this a critical to making progress on a complex practice that might otherwise seem out of reach.

We found that using the tool encouraged staff to see their collaborative with teachers as valued by the organization. Building on this, they embarked on a new approach, partnering more strongly with schools, where they faced tensions related to their own enjoyment of doing the design and development work, as opposed to serving in more of a consulting role. We see this as similar to the shifts that happen as teachers, for instance, shift into teacher developer roles. While these findings are preliminary, they shed light on ways organizations may need to support their staff involved in such work. Future work will continue to lead to refinements of the tool and investigate ways it might foster growth of various kinds.

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Appendix: Sample of the Community-Engagement Improvement Tool

Section 2. Rationale

This section asks you to characterize the reason for partnering with a community groups you described in the previous section. These entities will be described as community collectively in the sections that follow. Below, "Organization" refers to your organization. This section asks about the **primary reason your organization engaged/s with the community on a specific project.**

Check the one that best applies to your program:

A. ☐ Community members mobilized to advocate for their own educational priorities and reached out to your organization for technical assistance.

B. ☐ The community has expressed social and educational desires /goals and your organization believes that it can offer support and plans to reach out to the community out for feedback and partnership.

C. ☐ The organization perceives that there may be a mismatch between the needs the community to and the apparent capacity of the community to meet these needs. The organization has programming they believe may help and reached out to the community to see if they are interested.

D. ☐ After looking at educational outcome deficits based off educational outcomes report data the organization may have approached a governing body (e.g., district or school leaders) or decision maker/s to adopt the program.

Check the one that best applies to your program, in terms of where information for the program and the need for the program originated:

A. ☐ Community members characterized their own needs, desires, and goals, and may have created the program previously.

B. ☐ The organization understood the community needs, desires, and goals, but sought feedback from community experts[1] prior to creating the program.

C. ☐ The organization identified communities that are not using the program and solicits these communities to use the program, likely with a goal to produce more equitable outcomes for the community by addressing barriers to educational access through this partnership.

D. ☐ The organization did not consult with community members before using data driven educational deficits as a rational for engagement. Primarily information external to the community and that the community may not value, such as school grades, test scores, and similar.

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[1] **Community experts** = community members with a variety of backgrounds who have varied skills, knowledge, that can help to address complex problems in complex situations

This domain addresses the extent to which the projects includes community perspectives in rationalizing the partnered project/program. It may indicate the extent to which community partners advocated for the partnership and the amount of power the community has in the initial rationale for engagement. Identifies the extent of community agency[2] or community control in the configuration of the focal educational issue. There are four categories of rationales for partnering that reflect a range of community agency include: 1) By the Community: active community selection of the educational issue; 2) With the Community: locally relevant and culturally situated; 3) For the Community: improving access to educational services*; 4) On the Community: addressing educational deficits.*

If you answered	**Your program is characterized as…**
A	**by the community.** Members of the community selected the educational issue. The organization is invited to provide support or partnership. This invited relationship reflects the greatest community control because it started "where the people are." Communicating with existing community organizations and expressing an interest in partnering and sharing resources may be one way to initiate this type of power shared relationship. Creating a dialogue where it is clear that the organization desires to support the community in their selected outcomes and program design is key in maintaining community agency in the relationship. Allowing the organization, the freedom to steer the relationship and maintain control and ownership of the program is another factor indicative of this level. This level requires a great deal of flexibility on the side of the organization, as it is mainly playing a supporting role to what the community is trying to achieve. Not all communities will be at this level of organization and advocacy therefore this level may not be easily acquired because it involves a high degree of involvement from the community before the relationship with the organization begins.
B	**with the community.** The organization understands that there are community experts, knowledge and systems in place that should be utilized for a long term sustainable and culturally relevant program. The organization demonstrates a keen understanding of the historical and locally relevant issues, but however the issues were not put forward by the community. The organization plans on using the local knowledge to design the program. Engages the community through a strength-based approach. Reflects an aspiration for equitable power sharing relationship. This approach may indicate that the program could be sustained by the community when the partnering organization leaves. Understanding the historically and locally relevant issues requires some time and research with key informants within the community. This requires that the organization build rapport with key members and develop a trusting equitable relationship with them. These issues may not be readily identified but may take some time to uncover. Identifying community experts should be an effortful and deliberate process

[2] **Community agency** = the capacity of a community to act independently on their own without the outside influence of other organizations.

	requiring the organization develop relationships with members that may not be readily obvious. Building these relationships and gathering this information may take some time and effort but helps to promote the relevancy of the program for the community and encourages future partnering opportunities.
C	**for the community.** The organization is working to address educational access inequities as they have identified. However, the agency of the community is not present. The rationale for the relationship is focused on delivery of services and fills the need for services improvement with the aims of fulfilling organizational goals. The relationship is focused on underutilization or poor implementation of educational services due to capacity or barriers encountered in the partnering communities. The program has considered the community context in that it has acknowledged particular barriers to educational access. However, this relationship does not honor the resiliency that may exist within the community. Although the program may benefit the community, there is little power sharing within the relationship and is primarily concerned with the outcome goals of the organization to increase reach. This type of relationship would benefit from a dialogue between the community and the organization, identifying community experts and goals and creating programming that is culturally situated and relevant increasing the potential for long term sustainability.
D	**on the community.** This project aims to address educational deficits. These educational deficits are identified through educational outcome data not driven by the community. These programs are aimed at addressing the educational shortcomings of the community as it compares to other communities. Community was not involved in prioritizing data driven educational deficits as a primary issue of community concern. Historical and social contexts have not been understood and the community voice[3] is not present. This kind of relationship closely replicates the colonizer/ colonized dynamic. The role of power needs to be reconsidered in order to foster a more equitable partnership.[4] Relationships at this level should consider taking the time to understand the communities they are working with, their strengths, barriers, and desired outcomes. Taking the time to engage with the community will benefit the long-term success of the community if their values, goals and strengths are incorporated into the programming.

[3] **Community Voice** = Degree to which community organizations and members played a role in decision making

[4] **Equitable partnerships** = require sharing power, resources, credit, results, and knowledge, as well as, a reciprocal appreciation of each partner's knowledge and skills at each stage of the project, including problem definition/issue selection, research design, conducting research, interpreting the results, and determining how the results should be used for action.