



Your Connecting Experience:

Responsible Community Engagement¹

What are the features of effective and responsible engagement between university students and the communities they encounter in the course of research and internship projects? As a student in the Bridging Disciplines Program embarking on a Connecting Experience, you might work with recently arrived immigrants here in Austin, conduct policy research in Washington, D.C., or intern with a microfinance enterprise in West Africa. No matter what you do and where you travel, it is important to approach your Connecting Experience with an understanding of the potential challenges and rewards of engaging with a new community. Many scholars and practitioners of social justice have theorized effective community engagement. Following are the main strategies that emerge in this body of literature, as well as a bibliography for further reading.

Learn about the community before you engage. Do your homework to learn about the community's issues, assets, needs, strengths, challenges, and resources.² Search local papers and read blogs pertaining to your internship site or research topic. Of course, even the most well-prepared student may still encounter surprises during his or her Connecting Experience. Be prepared to adapt and adjust to the unexpected.

Do not take your experience for granted. Professors, internship supervisors, and other project coordinators invest considerable time to train and supervise you. Respect the culture of the community you are engaging by taking initiative to ensure that their time is well-spent. Respect your supervisor's time by taking advantage of the resources at your disposal to find answers, when possible, to questions you may have before posing them to your supervisor.³

¹ **This resource was developed in collaboration with the Bernard and Audre Rapoport Center for Human Rights and Justice at UT-Austin.** The author is grateful for feedback from Dr. Barbara Harlow and BDP Advisor Christine Anderson.

² Richard M. Battistoni et. al. *The Engaged Department Toolkit*. Campus Compact, 2003. 74.

³ Virginia Raymond. "Bridging community & academia in the struggle to end violence against Latin@s" (University of Texas: 19 February 2010). http://www.virginiaraymond.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Bridging_Community_and_Academia.Virginia_Marie_Raymond_February_2010_Outline.pdf).



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Know yourself; cultivate self-awareness. Identify your intellectual strengths, practical skills (graphic design, writing, or social media coordination, for instance), and previous academic, professional, and extracurricular experience that might prove useful during your Connecting Experience. Make these skills and strengths known to your supervisor. Once you begin your Connecting Experience, observe what's going on in the office or project and consider what your role is within that dynamic. Ask yourself how your work fits in with the long-term community engagement objectives of the organization or research project.

Reflect throughout your community engagement experience. Many teachers who involve an element of community engagement in their courses emphasize that sustained reflection is crucial for students to understand the significance of their experience, including on-site challenges and benefits in terms of moral development. Keep a journal and/or schedule regular reflection discussions with a mentor, if possible.

Practice courtesy and respect while reflecting critically upon your experience. As you participate in a research or internship project, it is important to voice questions you have about motives, objectives, and tactics. Practice respect by carefully wording and timing your questions. For example, rather than asking why certain strategies are in place at the busy height of a project that is already in motion, find an opportunity during a quieter moment to debrief with your supervisor and pose questions that came up for you in the process of working on the project.

Be conscientious about the language you use to think, talk, and write about your Connecting Experience. (For example, instead of “working on behalf of a community,” “working with a community.”) The language you use helps frame how you understand your orientation to the members of the community you're engaging with.

Recognize the value of the human interactions that take place during your Connecting Experience. End-goals and material “deliverables” are important structuring factors of a Connecting Experience, but pay attention to the networks you develop as well. The community you build may be as important a product of your Connecting Experience as the project you complete.



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Balance compassion with humility. Especially in advocacy work, it is important to approach the community in which you are working with a spirit of humility. As Linda Alcoff writes, “Sometimes... we do need a ‘messenger’ to advocate for our needs.”⁴ Yet there are risks associated with speaking for others, including the “possibility of misrepresentation” and the expansion of “one’s own authority and privilege.” Therefore, Alcoff suggests that “We should strive to create wherever possible the conditions for dialogue and the practice of speaking with and to rather than speaking for others.”⁵ Relatedly, ethics philosopher Didier Fassin calls for “a critique of compassion.” Fassin explains that “it is [supposedly] because we see the other as another self... that we feel sympathy for him or her and act for his or her good.” Yet it is “the very conditions of the social relation between the two parties, which, whatever the goodwill of the agents, make compassion a moral sentiment with no possible reciprocity.” Compassion, according to Fassin, “always presupposes a relation of inequality.”⁶ Of course, empathy and compassion inspire our community engagement in important ways. Approaching your Connecting Experience with a dose of humility in addition to compassion will help pre-empt any inadvertent reinforcement of inequality, and set the conditions for the productive collaboration that is at the heart of effective community engagement.

Further reading:

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⁴ “The Problem of Speaking for Others.” *Cultural Critique* 20 (1991-92). 29.

⁵ Ibid., 23.

⁶ *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2012. 3-4.



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